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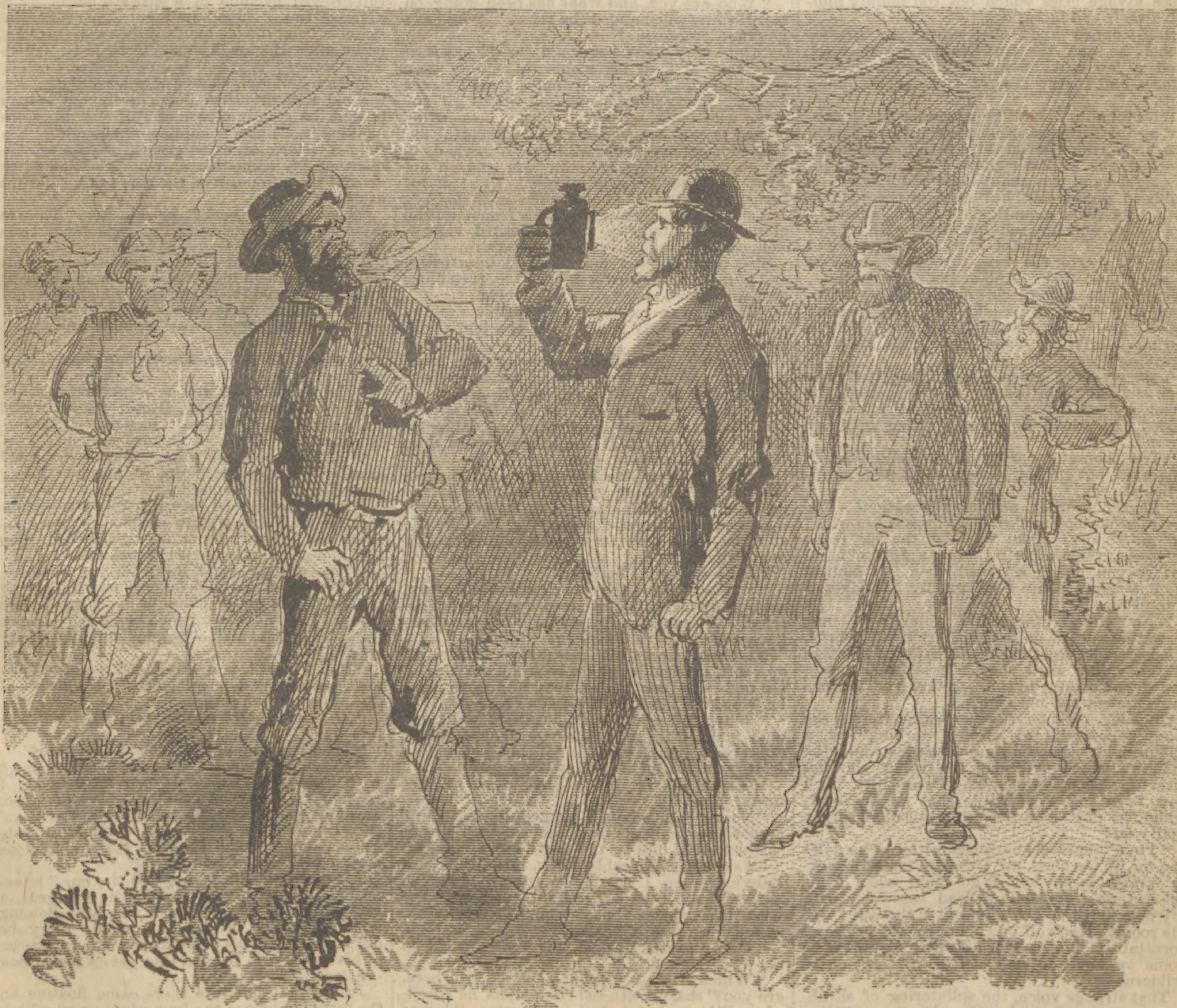
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No. 283

SLEEK SAM, THE DEVIL OF THE MINES; Or, THE SONS OF THE FIERY CROSS.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," "OLD '49,"
"THREE-FINGERED JACK," "THE LONG-HAIRED PARDS," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.



"SLEEK SAM, BY THE ETERNAL!" "AY! SLEEK SAM, THE DEVIL OF THE MINES! NOW WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?"
MOCKINGLY CRIED OSWALD.

Sleek Sam,

THE DEVIL OF THE MINES.

OR,

The Sons of the Fiery Cross.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "DAN BROWN OF DENVER,"
"OLD '49," "SOL SCOTT," "JOAQUIN,"
"THE SADDLE KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FALLING AMONG THIEVES.

"SLUG him!"

"Knife the cursed Yankee!"

"Down with him, comrades! All together! Don't let him have a chance to use his teeth!"

A single horseman spurring along the valley road, using his armed heels with an assiduity worthy a better reward. Puffing, wheezing, with now and then a coughing groan, the nearly broken down animal could not be coaxed into a gait faster than a shuffling fox-trot, and this was maintained only by the perseverance displayed by the owner of those armed heels.

He was looking eagerly ahead, peering from beneath the broad brim of his slouched felt hat, which served to keep the bright rays of the full moon, whose silvery disk was just clearing the dark line before the traveler, from confusing his vision. He felt that the impatiently expected goal was nigh at hand, and was looking for some landmark by which to confirm his hopes, with not a thought of lurking danger.

Yet danger there was, and all the more to be dreaded because of its very unexpectedness.

With one of those spasmodic groans, the crippled horse stumbled again, and despite the strong hand which tightened the reins, it plunged headlong to the ground with a suddenness that took its rider wholly by surprise and cast him heavily over its head.

Then, dropping both ends of the tough rope by means of which they had accomplished their purpose, the dark forms which had been lying in ambush among the bushes and valley-grasses, rose to their feet and dashed forward, uttering those savage cries which but too plainly indicated their evil intentions.

Half-stunned and taken wholly by surprise though he was, the traveler proved his manhood as few could have done under the circumstances and in the face of such overwhelming odds.

With an angry shout he scrambled to his feet, just as the foremost of his assailants were upon him, and striking out heavily with his left hand, knocked one of the ruffians heels over head. His right hand was snatching a pistol from its scabbard on his hip, but even as the weapon flashed its silver mountings in the moonlight, a stout club encountered his wrist with a force that knocked the pistol high into the air and seemed to shatter the bones through the cushion of sinew and flesh. And at the same moment, a crushing blow descended on his skull from behind, and with a gasping cry, the assailed reeled, his hands clutching blindly, his eyes staring wildly, his senses reeling, his strength forsaking him.

A sinewy hand grasped him savagely by the neck and flung him heavily to the ground, uttering a fierce curse as the falling pistol exploded with a loud report on striking the flinty ground.

"Ten thousand curses on your clumsiness!" he grated, but cutting himself short with an inarticulate cry.

"Bloody murder an' massacreation! The devil's broke loose, an' all o' his imps is a-howlin'! Gi' me room! Make way fer the ole man! Perleece! Cornstable! I ain't a fightin' man, but ef you git in my road when I'm huntin' my hole, don't come onto me fer damidges ef you git hurt!"

With almost incredible volubility burst forth these words on the evening air in a shrill, cracked voice, startling the black-faced ladrones of the valley until they released their victim and stared blankly in the direction from whence came the unexpected sounds.

Crashing through the bushes, scattering the loose stones with his nimbly working feet, a phantom-like shape sprang into view amid the shadows which overhung the valley, dashing direct for the robbers, yelling frantically. And now twin spouts of flame shot out in front, while the cracked voice rung out more shrilly than ever:

"I'm a innercent, harmless critter ef ye don't pen me up too cluss, an' I wouldn't hurt a suck-in' grasshopper, but I go blind when I git skeered, an' I kin split a dead basswood with my noggin' ef it don't git out o' the way! Gi' me room! Han's off or I holler fer the perleece! cornstable! Bloody murderation! why don't ye come on, boys, an' pull the ole man out o' the wilderness?"

That strange voice, the splintering of shrubbery and the clattering of rocks; the whistling bullets, with the deceptive shadows which

seemed to take on human shape, startled the night-rangers, and they involuntarily fell back from their still quivering victim, with little cries of wondering dismay.

And then, as though in answer to the wild cries of the stranger, there came the swift clattering of iron-shod hoofs from the opposite direction, and a clear voice shouted:

"Down with the bloodthirsty bounds! Don't let one cheat the hangman or go unwhipped of justice!"

Spang! spang! came two pistol-shots, and with the ragged lead whistling in uncomfortable proximity to their heads, the foot-pads turned as with one accord and darted toward the nearest cover.

"Good Lawd! thar's more a comin'! Now I will scoot! Gi' me room 'cordin' to my size or I'll run ye down! Moly Hoses! ef I wasn't so durned bad skeered I could only see a open channel—ugh! Hit a snag an' I knowed it!"

Seemingly half-crazed with fear or excitement, the stranger came floundering on, slacking his mad pace now and then to fire a shot straight ahead, apparently without aim, then plunging on, only to come into collision with the crippled horse, over whose carcass he tumbled, end over end, just as the second rider dashed up to the spot.

"Who is it? What's the matter? Speak quick, or I'll let daylight through your carcass in a holy minute!"

Sharp the words and stern the voice of the speaker as he wrenched up his horse until its haunches almost touched the ground, his right hand outstretched with leveled revolver.

Blinded though he claimed to be, the old man was able to see, and realized the new peril which threatened him, and with a howl of fear he rolled swiftly aside, just in time to escape the bullet that sprinkled his face with dirt.

"Don't shoot, boss!" he spluttered, as he scrambled to his feet with ludicrous haste. "It's only me, an' I wouldn't hurt a sick kitten! Don't shoot, or I'll holler *perleece*!"

The mounted man seemed still in doubt, for the revolver clicked sharply and the black muzzle closely followed the motions of the old man as he danced to and fro, ducking and dodging, twisting and turning as he strove to baffle the menacing weapon, squeaking out his appeal for a truce.

"Who are you, and what has been going on here?" sternly demanded the rider. "Who have you been murdering?"

"Hope may die ef I ever did, boss!" expostulated the old man, his whine more than ever accentuated. "Deed an' double deed I never done it! I was jest whoopin' up fer to git out o' the wilderness, when that durned boss-critter lunged up an' snagged my b'iler, knockin' me west-end-an'-crooked. All I axes o' anybody is fer to be let alone, an' now you gits up an' 'cuses me o' doin' bloody murder! Ugh! it jes' turns my ole blood to buttermilk—so it do!"

A convulsive shudder shook his frame, and he glared about him with a wild, hunted expression, dimly revealed by the moonlight.

Still the mounted man seemed unsatisfied, and still his ready revolver held the trembling wretch covered, as he sternly uttered:

"There were more of you—where are the rest of the bloody gang? Tell the truth—lies won't save you!"

A gasping groan from the prostrate figure spared the accused from giving an immediate answer, and then the one who had been so ruthlessly attacked, staggered to his feet, wiping the blood from his eyes, glaring confusedly around him, his hands mechanically fumbling in search of a weapon.

As the light of the full moon fell full upon his face, a sharp cry escaped the lips of the mounted man, and he leaped from the saddle, one hand grasping the staggering man by the shoulder, as he bent forward to stare intently into his face.

"Is it—you, Talfourd?"

"Hands off!" and the other tore himself away, putting up his empty hands in a position of defense. "You took me by surprise, or your whole gang couldn't have downed me! Come—"

His husky, uncertain speech was broken off as a soft, musical laugh broke from the lips of the man who confronted him, and once more he wiped the blinding blood from his eyes.

"Why, Talfourd, old fellow, don't you know me?" laughed the man who had so opportunely appeared upon the scene. "Would you strike a friend who's done his best to serve you?"

"Oswald—it is you! What does all this mean, anyhow?"

"That's just what I wanted to find out," laughed the man, grasping the hand which was thrust toward him by the bewildered traveler. "I was riding peaceably along, bound for New Babylon, when I heard the rumpus here, and spurred up to take a hand in the game. But when I recognized you, you might have knocked me down with a feather."

"My horse was thrown, and a gang piled on me—"

"Which reminds me that— He!o! you here, are you?" sharply uttered Oswald, as he wheeled swiftly and faced the old man. "I was afraid you had given me the slip."

"Thar ye go ag'in, with yer p'izen hints—an' me a pore ole cuss which mought be your gran'-dad!" whined the patriarch in an injured tone.

"Why fer should I slip off?"

"To escape the penalty due your attempted crime."

"I knowed it! It's jest my luck! I come here to hev a little peace an' quietness, an' the very fust thing the hull durned kentry turns upside down, jest to mux me up in a row! It's a durned shame, an' I don't keer who knows it—so thar! Go on with your rat-killin' and hang me, ef ye want!"

The man who had been addressed as Talfourd gazed keenly into the face of the doleful speaker as though the tones were familiar to his ear, and as Oswald seemed about to make a sharp reply, he stepped forward and said:

"It was your voice that I heard, just as they struck me down. You do not belong to that murderous gang. You came to my assistance when they had me foul."

"I don't run with no murderin' gang. I was jest moggin' along, huntin' fer some place whar I could take a soun' snooze without bevin' to pony up a bull gold-mine fer the privilege o' feedin' a host o' bugs an' fleas an' sich-like, when I hearn a holy picnic bu'st loose—"

"And you gallantly rushed to the rescue!" impulsively cried Talfourd, grasping his hands and warmly shaking them. "I owe you my life—you and Mr. Oswald, here."

"Ef you kin make him b'lieve that, it's all I ax," the old man grinned, with a doubtful glance toward Oswald. "He rid up an' tried to bu'st my cabeza wide open with a blue whistler, an' would hev it thet I'd bloody-murdered you—so he jest did!"

"I took you for one of the gang, but if I have wronged you, I'm willing to be forgiven," laughed Oswald.

"Indeed you have," earnestly uttered Talfourd. "I remember hearing his voice, just as those rascals knocked me over. I heard him shooting too, didn't I?"

"Waal, I should remark!" with a squeaking chuckle. "Ef I didn't jest turn a bull mule-battery loose on the p'izen varmints, then I wouldn't say so! They was nigh a thousan' of 'em, but that didn't faze the ole man. He jest lit in fer all he was wuth, an' the way he did scatter them whelps o' Satan was a caution to a full-grown cyclone in a straw-stack! Ef a dozen or two o' them hain't got thar everlastin' sickness from the ole man's pill-boxes, then my name ain't Hector Ajax— Good lawd, fellers—*le's scoot*!"

With a ludicrous change of voice and manner, the old man crouched down as though to hide behind the goodly person of Talfourd, his voice quaking, his limbs trembling as though with a sudden attack of ague, greatly to the amazement of his companions, who stared swiftly around them in quest of the cause of his abrupt attack of terror.

"Look by the rock!" he hissed. "They're layin' fer us! Good-by! I'm goin' fer to hunt my hole, I am!"

The iron grip of Oswald fastened upon his shoulder and held him fast, while with his right hand he covered the dark shape which all could now see lying close beside a white bowlder, only a score yards away from their present position.

Oswald gave vent to a short, hard laugh, then said:

"There's only one, and he's a corpse! One of your two dozen patients, Doctor Hector Ajax! Go over and take his scalp as a neat little memento of this night's adventure, old gent!"

"Tain't none o' my work," muttered the old man, with a sickly attempt at a grin. "You done it—ef it's a corpus!"

"They were gone before I got here—worse luck for me," with a grim laugh. "I can't deprive you of your honors, my aged friend. You laid him out, that's sure as gospel writ."

"Thar you go—an' I jest wish you wouldn't now!" whined the old fellow, peevishly. "I tell ye I ain't got no claim to it. I was so bad skeered I didn't know which way the rumpus come. I didn't think o' nothin' but huntin' my hole."

"But I heard you shooting," persisted Oswald, seemingly determined to fix the death of the outlaw on the other.

"Jest to skeer the rest an' keep my own sperrets up."

"Then you own up that you're a coward?"

"Everybody knows that that knows me," with a sheepish grin. "It was born in me, I reckon. Anyways, I can't git shet of it, no-how. It comes onto me by fits an' starts, an' then I don't know nothin' but to hunt my hole as quick as the law'll let me. It's a scan'alous fact, gentlemen, ef I do say it!"

"It matters little who killed the cur," interposed Talfourd, who had been engaged in stanching the blood which was still flowing from his gashed head. "I am only sorry he did not come by his death at my hands. Some of his mates will, if I can ever get on their track—I swear it!"

Just at that juncture there came floating on the favoring breeze the humming sound of human voices, and with another ague-attack, He-

for Ajax turned and plunged blindly into the arms of Oswald, who held him in a vise-like grip.

"Let up, durn it!" he panted, struggling desperately to free himself. "They're comin' back to massacre the bull kit-an'-boodle o' us! Let me go—I'm sick—I want to hunt my hole quick as the good Lawd'll let me do it!"

"Peace, you fool!" angrily grated Oswald, knocking his feet from under him with a dexterous trip. "You're running straight into danger; do you want to get knocked on the head for good and all?"

"Ef I kin ever git out o' this cussed kentry with hull bones, I'll jine the church ef it kills me!" whined the trembling wretch, hugging Oswald's feet as though they might prove a bulwark of safety.

"Listen to me, you infernal idiot!" hissed Oswald, clapping the cold muzzle of a pistol against the temple of the moaning craven. "Stand up and obey orders, or I'll scatter what few brains you have got all over the ground!"

"Don't shoot! It was born in me, don't I tell ye? I can't no more help bein' a coward then I kin fly without wings!" whined Hector, rising to his feet, but trembling so violently that he could scarcely stand alone.

"They're coming from toward town," muttered Talfourd, bending his ear in listening. "I don't believe it can be the gang that attacked me."

"There's no telling. New Babylon has a hard list of citizens, and there's more than one among them who would rather slit a throat than take a drink. Leave it to me, and I reckon we'll come out somewhere near the top of the heap," coolly replied Oswald, casting a swift glance around them.

"We're too much exposed here. Over yonder where the shade is thickest, we will wait for the gentlemen."

As he spoke, he moved forward along the road, one hand firmly grasping the arm of Hector Ajax, as though he feared an attempt on the part of that worthy to steal away. Only a few rods, then he paused again, where the shade cast by an overhanging tree rendered their figures but indistinctly visible at a little distance.

The hum of voices now sounded clearer, and at no great distance they could distinguish a half dozen lights, shining redly over a score or more human shapes.

"Let me do the talking, and you make sure this coward don't make a break-away," muttered Oswald, releasing Hector Ajax and stooping low over the ground. For an instant there was a tiny spot of light on the ground beneath him, but it quickly vanished, and he once more stood erect, facing the now close-at-hand crowd.

"Hellow! yender they be, under that tree!" cried a hoarse voice from the crowd. "Say—yow!"

"Keep your distance, if you please, gentlemen!" cried Oswald, sternly. "You're quite close enough for talking, now."

"Now you've done it!" groaned Hector Ajax, deftly slipping around behind the broad figure of Talfourd. "Talk 'em a little more easy, can't ye? We'll all be massacred, sure."

"Silence, you infernal cur!" grated Oswald, savagely.

There was a bustle among the crowd at this defiant response to their challenge, and for a few moments there was silence. But then the fellow who had spoken before, uttered:

"Who 'in blazes be you that crows so loud, anyway?"

"A brass-back game, trimmed and gaffed! Do you want my pedigree and fighting weight?" promptly retorted Oswald, at the same time turning the slide of a small bull's-eye lantern, casting a clear light full upon his bold, handsome features.

A brief silence, broken by a startled cry from the crowd, telling that they recognized the face thus set in light for their benefit; then a hoarse voice uttering:

"Sleek Sam, by the Eternal!"
"Ay! Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines! Now what are you going to do about it?" mockingly cried Oswald.

CHAPTER II.

A MAN OF AUTHORITY.

PROMPTLY enough the answer came:

"Foller the level you strike out, an' ax no questions. We didn't ketch onto your voice at the fust-off, an' never 'spected you was anywhars in these parts. Ef I hed, I'd 'a' put more butter on the tip o' my tongue afore I slung it at ye."

It was the same stalwart fellow who had acted as spokesman for the crowd from the start, but now his tones were very different from those in which he had couched his challenge. Clear and prompt enough, but with a peculiar quaver in them, as though it found birth in bodily fear of the being who had so boldly branded himself "The Devil of the Mines."

"That's all right, my good fellow," with a careless laugh, as he lowered the hammers of his pistols, and returned them to their resting-places. "You came at us so brash that I looked for nothing short of a pitched battle."

"We heard the shootin' and thought we could make out somebody yellin' bloody murder. We reckoned thar was crooked work o' some sort goin' on, an' so lit out to take a hand in, afore the bank closed. It's all right, now, though, sence you're to the fore."

"Fortunately, it is all right, though it was a rather close call for a good man," laughed Oswald. "A friend of mine happened to fall among thieves, a bit ago. They tripped up his nag, and took him by surprise. The chances are that he would have been murdered, only for the opportune coming of this nice old gentleman, who put the gang to flight, and neatly laid out a package of cold meat, just over yonder."

During this interchange, the party from the direction of town, were slowly advancing, Sleek Sam no longer opposing them, and as he uttered the last sentence, with a low laugh, his hand closed upon the shoulder of Hector Ajax, instantly renewing that curious ague-fit.

"Now you jest want to quit, durn it!" whined the old man, his voice a most doleful squeak. "The good Lawd knows I ain't able fer to kill a human critter ef I wanted to ever so bad! You done it your own self, an' now you want to chuck it off onto me, to git my durned ole neck stretched out o' shape. It's a pesky shame, that's what it is, an' me a pore ole cuss that wouldn't hurt a sick kitten. Lawd! ef I could only hunt my hole, an' pull it in arter me!"

A chuckling laugh broke from the crowd. "Hellow! ef it ain't ole Bag-o'-bones, I'm a petrified liar right from head-quarters!"

"Do you know him?" demanded Oswald, sharply, turning the full glare of light from his lantern upon the face of the old man, who still trembled in his iron grip.

A broad grin expanded the coarse features of the spokesman as he came a little closer.

"Waal, we sorter got acquainted to-day. He come in on the mornin' train, an' as the boys see he was a pilgrim an' a stranger, they felt it thar bounden duty fer to take him in—"

"They jest up an' did it, too!" snuffled Hector Ajax.

"The ole coon got purty full o' bug-juice, an' then sot his clapper goin', stuffin' us greenies with all what he could an' hed done, ontel he made us tired. Then we sot little Banty Dick onto him, an' you'd jest ort to see how the pesky ole fraud lit out fer tall timmer! The durnedest fun! I didn't reckon he'd let up on his gait this side o' the jumpin'-off place, he was so 'tarnal bad skeered! An' him's the one you give credit o' keelin' over a human critter? Boss, ef it was not you, I'd bust wide open with the joke—I would so!"

"I knowed it wasn't me that done it—'cause I couldn't ef I wanted to," grinned Hector Ajax, in a steadier tone. "It's a pesky shame you tryin' to shove your bloody murders off on a ole man like me—it jist is!"

"All right," with a reckless laugh. "Since you are determined not to share the honor, I'll bear it as best I can. I'm only sorry I was not in time to lay out more of the cowardly cuss!"

"Then they was somebody laid out?" curiously asked the tall fellow, with a keen glance around. "Wharabouts mought a feller look fer the cadaver, boss?"

"Back here a bit," replied Oswald, turning and flashing the light of his lantern along the road. "I forgot for the moment—we'd ought to have been crowding that gang, instead of wasting time in palaverin'—Ha!"

A sharp exclamation broke from his lips as the light flashed around the base of the white bowlder, and leaping swiftly forward, he paused with a grating oath of mingled surprise and chagrin.

A little pool of blood marked the gravel which surrounded the bowlder, but no corpse was visible.

"Gone? and I could have taken my oath that he was a dead dog!" exclaimed Sleek Sam, in plainly puzzled tones.

"Mebbe his mates toted him off when you was on the lookout fer us," suggested the tall citizen of New Babylon.

"Either that or else he was only hurt, and has crawled off in the bushes to die," muttered Oswald.

"Ef he did that, I reckon our noses is keen enough fer to smell him out—eh, lads?"

A chorus of affirmative exclamations greeted this observation, and hound-like the crowd began to scatter as though seeking a lost scent.

"If you find him alive, bring him to town," hastily observed Sleek Sam. "There's something curious about this affair, and I'd like to get to the bottom of it."

"Jest as you say, boss. Whooray, lads, fer a man-hunt! Pizen fer the crowd that I corral the fust skelp!" recklessly cried Long John Dement, dashing into the cover.

With yells and shouts and bursts of laughter that were even more menacing, the rough crowd followed his example, tearing here and there, trampling down the bushes and thick valley grass as they searched for the missing body.

"Let them go," muttered Oswald, as he turned toward Talfourd and the old man. "It's a mighty tough outfit when they've got fire-water

aboard, and though I don't doubt but what I could hold them in check, at the worst, I reckon we'd better go on while they're busy looking for sign."

"I hope it's not far away," said Talfourd, with a short laugh. "I can see stars yet from the little love-tap those bounds lent me, and I'm afraid my poor horse is in still worse fettle."

"He'll never carry you ag'in, boss," muttered Hector, who had been stooping over the still prostrate animal. "All two both forelegs is broke whar he pitched onto the gravel!"

A hasty examination assured both Talfourd and Oswald of this fact, and with a swift motion the latter plunged his knife into the throat of the suffering creature.

Talfourd started back with a little cry as he witnessed this deliberate deed, but Oswald only laughed shortly as he tore up a bunch of grass and wiped the stained blade.

"It was all that man could do for the poor beast. Surely you wouldn't have him lie sufferin'?"

Reason was on his side, but for all that, Talfourd felt a sudden repulsion for the man who had so gallantly ridden to his assistance when so hard pressed. His manner of using the steel was more that of a butcher than a merciful man.

"You can ride my horse," added Oswald, his tone again soft and smooth. "The town is only a short quarter away."

"And you?" hesitated Talfourd, again feeling that weakening sickness born of the loss of blood.

"New Babylon is my destination, as I judge it is yours, also. At any rate, you can go no further this night, until you have had that head of yours looked after. I can't say much for the town or its accommodations, since the end of the road has left it behind, but there's Diego Zarate—"

"You know him?"

"By name. I intend putting up with him while I remain in town," was the quiet reply, as he held the horse for Talfourd to mount.

"May he be a friend of yours?"

"Hardly that; but I expect to meet some friends there," hesitatingly replied Talfourd, climbing heavily into the saddle, that sudden-born repulsion still numbing his tongue.

Sleek Sam turned abruptly upon Hector Ajax, saying:

"As for you, my aged friend, now that the coast is clear, you had better hunt your hole. Some of that gang may still be skulking around, and you'd fare hardly if you were to fall into their clutches, after your exploit this eve. Good-night!"

The old man dodged nimbly around the horse, but instead of taking himself off, clung tenaciously to a stirrup-leather.

"I'm goin' too," he muttered doggedly. "I'm goin' to stick to ycu all ontel I know ef them holy terrors find that cold meat. Ef they do, I'm goin' to stick it out that you done the bloody murder—not me!"

"No one shall lay the weight of a finger on you for your share in this night's work, my friend," said Talfourd, earnestly, bending over and gently touching the head of the old man. "You must come with me. I've not had time to thank you—to thank either of you—and there's those awaiting my coming who will be glad to join their thanks to mine."

Oswald said nothing more as he led the good horse on toward the town, and the old man kept pace with them, though with an uneasy eye on Sleek Sam the while.

Around a bend in the road along which the party under lead of Long John Dement had come, then the little town came into uncertain view beneath the moonlight.

Not a very picturesque looking sight, despite its imposing title. A few scattering shanties, more or less dilapidated, more from the powers of the warring elements than the decaying touch of time, however. Not long since "the end of the road," full of life and bustle, a hot-bed of sin and high-handed crime, a marvel of business activity; only to be blighted in a night, like a bed of rank weeds by a heavy frost.

The road moved on, and the greater part of New Babylon moved with it, leaving only those few who had not the means or the energy to keep pace with the ever-shifting "business-center." One more of the ruined milestones which ever mark the progress of a great railway through the mighty West.

"That's the house over yonder, unless this knock on the head has turned my senses topsyturvy," hastily exclaimed Talfourd, as Oswald turned abruptly to the left.

"I know," was the quiet reply. "I reckon we'd better go around Robin Hood's barn. All of the town didn't go out with Long John, and you don't want to have to answer too many curious questions, until after your head's patched up. This way, we can rout up old Diego, without disturbing anybody else."

Even his eagerness to meet and greet those whom he felt sure were awaiting his coming fully as anxiously, could not blind Talfourd to the wisdom of this course, and under the influence of that consideration and with those soft,

musical tones filling his ears, that strange feeling of repulsion fled as though it had never found birth.

A few minutes later the horse paused in front of a rude two-story building not far from the railroad track, and Talfourd leaped from the saddle as nimbly as though he had never known what it was to be wounded, rapping sharply at the closed door, repeating the summons again and again in his eagerness.

"Coming!" growled a husky and harsh voice, as the shuffling of feet within became audible. "Who's there?"

"Open, Diego Zarate! Lively, man! It is I—Randal Talfourd—my wife and daughter are stopping here!"

The door was flung open by a thin, weazen-faced man in greasy, ragged garments, holding a light in one hand as he bowed low and repeatedly before the man who brushed past him.

"My wife and daughter—where are they?"

Before Diego Zarate could reply, a more welcome answer came to the impatient father and husband. With joyous exclamations of delight, two women darted through the dimly-lighted space and precipitated themselves upon the neck of Talfourd.

Delighted cries, half-smothered between eager kisses; little sobs of joy at meeting after a long separation; a group of three, forgetting all the rest of the world.

Such was the picture on which Sleek Sam and Hector Ajax gazed, standing on the threshold; and a doleful sigh broke from the shaggily-bearded lips of the elder man:

"Good Lawd! sech luck as some mortal critters do hev! It jest beats the Dutch, an' the Dutch beats the—Sarvent, mem!"

With little exclamations the two women ceased their affectionate demonstrations when that husky voice broke upon their ears, and as they gazed in blushing confusion at the odd figure which, hat in one hand and the other tugging at a lock of gray hair, stood bobbing benignly before them, they involuntarily shrunk back from the strangers. But then the light of the oil lamp shone upon the little rills of half-dried blood which streaked the face of Randal Talfourd, and all else was forgotten in their solicitude for his welfare.

"Merciful Mother!" gasped the elder of the ladies, her arms again wreathing themselves about the form of their loved one. "You are wounded—killed—"

With a light laugh the injured man cut her agitated exclamation short.

"Nay, only a scratch or two, dear, and nothing to awaken alarm in your breast. Only for these kind friends, though, it might well have been more serious. They risked their own lives to save mine, and I have brought them here, against their will, that you might join your thanks to mine."

"He gives us more credit than we can justly claim, ladies," spoke Oswald, stepping inside the door, removing his hat and bowing low. "His own strong arm and stout heart were quite capable of beating off the cowardly lardrines without our assistance."

"Not so," impulsively cried Talfourd. "I was down, with a cracked pate, when you came up. But come in—we can't talk here. Nay—I insist!"

There was little resistance made to his earnest urgings, and preceded by the agitated ladies, the party passed through the gloomy hall into a lighted room.

Then Randal Talfourd gave a hasty account of his almost fatal adventure, giving his two friends in need full justice.

In strong contrast the two men thus complimented looked as they stood "in blushing silence" beneath the compliments which were so liberally showered upon them by the warm-hearted man whom they had rescued from peril.

Samuel Oswald, who sometimes bore the ominous title with which Long John Dement's astonished exclamation of "Sleek Sam" was supplemented by the man himself, was apparently a trifle under middle age, of a stout, compact figure denoting no ordinary degree of physical power. His long, curling locks of hair were dark brown, soft and silken. His eyes were blue, large and lustrous. His features regular without being strictly classic in contour. His face was smooth shorn, his smile peculiarly winning, despite the thin lips and square, powerful chin.

He was neatly dressed in a suit of dark gray, of business cut; a single diamond glittered in his linen; another sparkled on the little finger of his left hand.

Hector Ajax, as he had given his name, was almost the opposite of Oswald in every respect. Tall, thin almost to emaciation so far as could be told through his shaggy hair and fluttering rags. His face was buried amid a mass of shaggy, grizzled beard, leaving only the thin, curved nose and keen blue eyes visible. A battered soft felt hat hung in one hand. The rags of a red woolen shirt, of a dirt-colored pair of corduroys, and the divorced uppers and soles of cowhide boots, served in a measure to conceal his nakedness.

Ugly, repulsive as he seemed, the two women, both beautiful beyond the ordinary, neatly,

almost richly dressed, as Talfourd finished his account, gratefully grasped his grimy hands and brokenly uttered their heartfelt thanks for the great service he had rendered them in serving the one so dear to their hearts. And the eldest even bent her proud head as though she would press her red lips to those rough hands!

"Now don't ye do it, mum—don't!" he gasped, hastily drawing back and whipping the dingy paws behind him. "The likes o' you an' the likes o' me—good Lawd! ef it don't make me want to hunt my hole— Say, you!" turning appealingly toward Talfourd, who seemed to be hugely enjoying his ludicrous dismay. "Call 'em off—git me out o' the wilderness afore I go clean bumfusticated— Now I hev done it!" he groaned, as the ladies stared wonderingly at him, unable to comprehend his strange actions and stranger speech.

"He is too modest, darlings—thank him all the same," said Talfourd, seriously, himself taking the hand of the oddity between his own and pressing it warmly.

Most dutifully wife and daughter obeyed, and so kind were their tones, so gentle their words, that the old man soon recovered from his confusion, and his tongue began to wag freely enough in all conscience.

Talfourd turned to Oswald, speaking to him low and gratefully, but the man who had given himself the chilling title of the Devil of the Mines, kept his keen eyes on the face of the ragamuffin, a cold smile playing about his lips.

"Waal, I should remark!" drawled Hector Ajax, gradually expanding beneath the warmth of his reception. "They was well-nigh onto a thousan' o' 'em, jest dead loads o' guns an' pistols an' butcher-knives onto 'em, an' the bull kit-an'-boodle a-climbin' all over the boss yender, when I fust hearn the rumpus. Most men would 'a' felt like huntin' thar holes an' gittin' out o' the wilderness in jest t'other way from that one whar the circus was goin' on—but the ole man didn't; he ain't made out o' no sech rotten timmer as them—not any! He jest girded up his lions an' sailed in fer all he was wuth. An' the way them p'izen reptyles did skin out o' Galilee was a caution to Judas Carrots!"

"They fled—and he was safe—my father?"

"Them that could go, did, you're mighty right! But all o' 'em didn't. Some stopped behind fer want o' motive power."

"You killed them?" with a little shudder of fright.

"Lawd love ye, miss," with a pompous fling outward of his dirty paw. "Not many—not more'n a dozen, all told! I didn't want to be too hard on the pore cusses—"

His voluble speech was abruptly cut short as he chanced to catch that keen look and peculiar smile, and the ladies took the occasion to turn to their loved one.

Still smiling, Oswald tapped Hector on the shoulder:

"I congratulate you my dear friend! You are coming out amazingly, and show to wondrous advantage in your true colors. Never again say that you are a coward, or deny that you are the one real hero of this little adventure. By the way—how many of the lardrones did you say you wiped out?"

"Not a durned one," muttered the old man, flinching under the silken touch. "I stick to it ef anybody was killed, you done it, an' I'll swar it onto you ef it takes a leg!"

CHAPTER III.

A "SWEET-SCENTED" CROWD.

LYING with his head beneath a scrubby bush, his body concealed among and by the thick valley grasses, a few yards up the road above the spot where Randal Talfourd's horse was so adroitly tripped, the chief of the night-rangers closely scrutinized the horseman as he came nearer, making sure that he was the one they sought before giving the signal for his men to spring their trap.

Unsuspectingly the rider passed by. Swiftly the snake-like streak across the road sprung up and caught around the fore-legs of the almost-broken-down horse, casting it heavily forward upon the stones. And out from their lowly ambush the footpads leaped, while their cunning chief also broke cover, and darted forward to make sure that their work was well done.

But, chief though he was, his was the voice that sounded the signal to beat a retreat when those ragged bullets began to whistle so viciously overhead, and his the first feet that turned to take their owner to cover in headlong flight.

Yet even as he did so, a savage, wondering cry escaped his lips, and scarcely had the bushes closed behind his form when he wheeled and took a single step back toward the road, his eyes flaming, his white teeth showing against his red lip like the sharp fangs of a hungry wolf.

From thence he was a witness of the peculiar scene which followed; of the blind stumble of the old man over the fallen horse, and the dashing up of the second horseman; then of the leveled pistol, the shot, and the wild cries from the old man.

That savage snarl grew deeper than ever, and tightly gripping the checkered butt of a revol-

ver, one hand was thrust through the leafy screen.

Only for a moment; then the weapon was slowly withdrawn and lowered; the black-masked man cautiously drew back, and a low, muttering parted his thin lips:

"Let them settle it between them. I've done my part."

Silently as though shod with velvet, the masked chief stole away from the road and rejoined his men, most of whom had already reached the spot agreed upon in case an emergency like the present should arise. The shadows hung deeply over the spot, affording the best of cover, though had it been day, their every motion could have been noted from the point in the road where Randal Talfourd had been ambushed. And aided by the bright rays of the full moon, the masked chief was now watching the movements of the triad in the road.

"I don't understand! He said nothing about—and if a friend, why was he shot at? And then, that reckless firing! The lead came dangerously near—I could hear it whistle—"

He turned abruptly, one hand mechanically dropping to the weapons in the belt around his waist, as a sharp grasp was fastened upon his shoulder; but the stiffening muscles relaxed, as he recognized the face of a friend, rather than foe.

"What is it, Tomaso?" he muttered, guardedly.

"Perico—he is not with us, and—you hear what the men are saying?" was the husky response.

The chief started, and a low-muttered curse broke from his lips, for he could distinguish sullen hints at foul play, as they gazed out toward a bowlder, showing white in the clear moonlight.

Mechanically his gaze followed theirs, and his breath came in a quick, hot gasp, as his eyes rested upon that tell-tale shape lying beside the rock.

A hasty sign called them around him, and then, in tones that were barely audible to their ears alone, the masked chief called the roll. One by one, the members answered to their names, until only one was left unpronounced—that of Perico Garguelez, brother of Tomaso.

"Dead—murdered—the victim of foulest treachery, he lies out yonder!" grated the brother, as the lips of his chief at last pronounced that name. "But I'll avenge him! I'll bathe his grave in blood so deep—"

He snatched a pistol from his waist and seemed on the point of darting toward the figures in the road, but then the stern grip of the masked chief was fastened upon his arm and throat, holding him powerless.

"Fool! dare you fly in the face of orders?"

"Perico—murdered—" gasped the Mexican, writhing like a wounded snake, but unable to free himself.

"True, there has been foul play, or else a blunder scarcely less criminal. In either case, I promise you shall have full satisfaction—but not now. Swear to obey orders, and to bide your time, under penalty—you comprehend?"

Swiftly the masked chief spoke, his hissing lips almost touching the ear of the vengeful brother. Almost miraculous were the effects of that broken sentence. Instantly his wild efforts to free himself ceased, and he remained passive in the steel grip of his superior.

"Good!" grimly muttered the chief, setting him free. "You are a wise man, Tomaso Garguelez. You shall not—"

He paused abruptly, turning his gaze in the direction of New Babylon, for the same sound that had startled the traveler and his companions in the road, came to his ears. A savage oath was grated betwixt his teeth, as he muttered:

"They've taken the alarm at town, and are pouring out to learn what is the matter. We must beat a retreat—"

"And leave him out yonder for them to discover and spit upon?" hoarsely demanded Tomaso.

"You're right—I forgot," was the hurried reply. "That would furnish them with too certain a clue for the good of our health. Come with me, Tomaso, and you, Pueblo Dave."

Moving swiftly yet silently through the cover, the masked chief led his two companions toward the road, pausing now and then to peer above the bushes at the enemy beyond. A short, grim laugh gurgled up in his throat as he saw them move off at a brisk pace down the road in the direction from whence came those disconcerting sounds.

"Good! they leave the coast clear for us to act, and in ten minutes from now, we'll be out of their reach, carrying that ugly bit of evidence with us!"

Barely above his breath were these words muttered, and hardly intended for the ears of his companions. He kept within arm's length of Tomaso Garguelez, watching him closely, ready to arrest any mad motion which his brotherly grief and lust for revenge should urge him to make.

On they crept, until the masked chief found the long raw-hide lasso by means of which the horse had been thrown to the ground, and rapidly drawing this in and coiling it up, he led the way to the nearest point of cover to the spot where that human shape lay so silent and motionless.

It might be dangerous to move out into the clear moonlight, and the masked chief had no idea of incurring any strictly unnecessary risks.

Crouching down close to the bushes, where his form would blend with them, he deftly swung the noose forward. True to his aim, it fell over the head of the corpse, and dexterously drawing it tight, the chief motioned his men to apply their strength to the free end.

Slowly at first, then more rapidly as it was seen that the noose was firmly caught, then dragged the lifeless clay toward the covert, only pausing when the hands of Tomaso could grasp those of his brother.

Silently but almost savagely he motioned them aside as he cast off the noose. Alone and unaided, he lifted the corpse.

Rapidly the masked chief led the way to the spot where half a score horses were tethered, a low, trilling chirp calling the remainder of the band to the rendezvous.

Still alone, Tomaso Garguelez raised the remains of his brother to the saddle, then climbed up behind him. The rest of the foot-pads held their animals by the bridles and moved away on foot, until at a safe distance from the scene. Then they mounted and rode on more rapidly.

Not a word was uttered until their chief called a halt, in a secluded valley where the boulders lay thick scattered around them.

"As well here as further on," he said, swinging himself from the saddle. "The shadows are too deep for those bloodhounds to follow our trail, and if they chance on the right direction, we will have warning of their coming in ample time to give them the slip."

Only Tomaso failed to follow his example, and his voice was harsh and grating as he muttered:

"A man he lived, and a man he died! He shall not have the burial of a dog while his brother lives!"

The hand of the masked chief closed upon his arm, and there was something almost gentle in the tones that said:

"It is only for one night, my son. He shall be honored in death, even as he was honorable, brave and faithful in life—I pledge you the faith of a brother. But our work is not yet accomplished. We have a sacred oath to fulfill before we can turn back. And more than that—we have the mystery of his death to solve!"

A somewhat curious speech, that last; but the bereaved brother seemed to comprehend its meaning, and he no longer hesitated.

Alighting from the doubly-laden horse, he lifted the bloody corpse of his brother in his arms, gently placing it on the grass beneath a scrubby tree, squatting beside it while the others of the band gathered about their chief.

"There has been strange blundering or else criminal treachery in this job, but we are none of us to blame," he spoke, swiftly, harshly. "We are bound by oath, and we will continue to perform our duty to the end. Then we will learn the whole truth of this night's work, and never know rest until our murdered brother is avenged!"

A hoarse muttering in chorus answered him. One listening to them would have thought them honest men who had suffered some terrible wrong, instead of having lost by death a fellow foot-pad in the exercise of their evil vocation.

"You, Pueblo Dave, will take the back track and see if any of those drunken dogs dare take our trail. Make sure whether they are on the trail, or simply running at random, if you see or hear anything of them. Then hasten back."

Without a word the burly ruffian thus addressed took his departure on foot, stealing away as silently as though nothing more substantial than one of the many shadows which surrounded the outlaw rendezvous.

The masked chief glanced around him, then strode to a heavy boulder which rested beneath a small tree. Tapping this with his hand, he made a sign which was readily interpreted.

Ranging themselves alongside, the black-faced men stooped together and applied their strength in one mighty, prolonged effort, slowly raising the boulder on one edge, and the chief propped it so that it could not fall back before they were in readiness for that to take place.

With knives and their hands they scooped out the earth, carefully placing every particle upon blankets which they spread for that purpose, only pausing in their labors when a muttered word from the masked chief told them their labor was sufficient for the purpose in view.

He passed over to where crouched Tomaso Garguelez, his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the fair, smooth face of the dead brother, his own countenance, revealed by the removal of the black mask which, in common with his fellows, he had until then worn as a safeguard against possible recognition, showing hard and stern-set. Though possibly the only one, he possessed

one virtue: that of powerful love for his own blood.

"Come—the grave is waiting," said the chief, softly.

Without a word Tomaso arose, carrying his dead in his arms to the excavation. At a sign from him, one of the band placed a blanket in the hole; then the corpse was placed upon it, both hands folded across the bullet-pierced breast.

The chief and the brother stood close beside the grave. The others formed a half-circle just behind them. Each head was bared and bowed as the chief spoke.

One by one he recounted the virtues—so called—of the dead brother, pausing after each one as though in expectation of the chorus which broke deep-toned from the band:

"We have heard, and it is true!"

"He came by his death while in the performance of his oath-bound duty. Ever foremost where the peril was greatest, he was the last to turn his back when the hand of fortune pressed heavily against us. To the appeal of a brother in distress, as to the call of duty, his ears were never closed. The bravest of the brave—the surest knife, the deadliest pistol, the most unerring noose—he was one whom we will sadly miss whenever there is hard or bloody work to be done. Yet we have one consolation: he died in harness, true and faithful to the last!"

"We have heard, and it is true!" came the chorus.

But the voice of Tomaso Garguelez did not unite with the rest on that occasion. His drooping head was tossed backward with a fierce gesture, and his black eyes glowed redly.

"Ay! he fell in the performance of his oath-bound duty; but how, and by whose hand? By that of an enemy to the band, or of one whom we trusted and were serving?"

"That is an enigma which remains for us to solve, my son," was the grave response. "If you have lost a brother, we have lost a comrade, bound to us by ties almost as sacred."

"And by those ties I call upon you to aid me in avenging him!" hoarsely cried the Mexican. "Blood for blood! And all the more surely if that blood was shed by one of the League!"

"Though it were the Great Father himself, he should not escape the dread penalty, once the crime is fairly proven!"

"There lies the proof!" pointing to the dead corpse.

"That a crime has been committed, but not at whose door it rightfully lies," was the interjection. "Be satisfied, my son, that the guilty one shall not escape."

Uplifting his clinched right hand, the masked chief chanted in a sepulchral tone, followed word by word by the band:

"By the Burning Cross—by the running stream—by the ashes of death and the broth of hell—I swear to never know rest until the murdered Son of the Fiery Cross is fully avenged! If an alien shed his blood, he shall die the death of a dog! If one of the Sacred League committed the crime, we will give his body to the Fiery Cross, his ashes to the running water to make broth for the demon who tempted him to prove false to his sacred vows!"

Weirdly impressive was the scene, dimly visible under the partially-intercepted rays of the silver moon, despite the vein of extravagance which permeated it all. And had there been any looker-on, he or they would have felt firmly convinced that each and every word uttered then and there by those grim, masked figures, was pronounced in deadly earnest.

"There was one name uttered which I caught," muttered Tomaso, as the props were knocked from under the boulder and the heavy mass permitted to fall over the corpse. "It is branded on my brain in letters of fire—Sleek Sam! He shall die first, then the others, when found out!"

Before any reply or comment could be made to this fierce speech, Pueblo Dave came gliding back from his espial.

"The bounds air afoot, an' workin' this way, boss!" he hastily uttered as he gained the side of the chief. "I don't reckon they're on any partic'lar trail, but they're runnin' hot foot, an' mought stum'le a-top o' us, ef we don't levant."

Cool and composed, the masked chief directed the men to lift up the blankets of earth and carry them to a distance, then scatter the particles so as to escape casual attention.

This was quickly done, then he added:

"Mount your horses and scatter, leaving as little sign behind you as possible. But do not forget that our work is far from being complete, and fail not to meet at the rendezvous in ample time for the second act of our little drama."

Nodding their understanding, the members of the masked band leaped into the saddle and rode away, leaving the dead alone to inhabit the little valley.

CHAPTER IV.

"THE LOST CAUSE."

SLEEK SAM did not deign to make any reply to the whining threat of the ragamuffin, but seeing Randal Talfourd sink into a chair, while the two ladies bent over him with agitated

cries, he strode swiftly across the room and gently put them aside, his voice very soft, his smile pleasant and cheerful, yet so full of a tender solicitude that he ran no risk of irritating their exaggerated fears for their loved one.

"Permit me, ladies—my hands are better fitted for such work. You need not fear; I have served my apprenticeship in the art of border surgery."

Randal Talfourd laughed, rising up and playfully pushing his wife and daughter aside, as he said:

"One would fancy I was already dead, or dying, at the very least! I'm all right—only a little tired."

"And a trifle weak from blood-letting: but as you say, it is nothing serious—a mere *baga-telle*, to a stout, healthy man in the prime of life," lightly uttered Sleek Sam, as he used gentle force to make the wounded man return to his seat. "At the same time, you will feel more comfortable, and look ten per cent neater if we use a little warm water and a few bits of court-plaster on that head of yours."

Reasonable as was this speech, the agitated, loving women would not give way until Talfourd laughingly commanded them to make way and permit the volunteer surgeon to ply his art.

Providing him with scissors, rags and warm water, they fell back, watching his white, nimble fingers at work, their own faces pale, their lips quivering.

Not the most propitious moment for a man like Hector Ajax to press his clumsy attentions upon them, one would fancy. Yet the old man cautiously crept closer to where the younger woman stood, and gently touching her hand, left between the instinctively-closing fingers, something small and white.

She started at the touch, turning around with a frightened, yet eager light in her glorious black eyes, only to shrink back from the nodding, grinning, hairy apparition.

"The good Lawd love ye, honey! 'tain't nothin' to git skeered at. A clip or two 'longside the cabeza don't count when a body gits oncet used to it. An' he ain't hurt, to speak of, your ole man ain't. He'll be pearter'n a cricket in hot water when to-morrow comes—he jest will!"

These were the words which both of the women heard, but following them came a soft whisper which reached the ears of the daughter alone:

"Watch yer chalance an' read it when ye kin—then slip out ef only fer a minnit, honey!"

A burning flush suffused the cheeks of the maiden and her lips parted, her dark eyes glowed more vividly than ever as she started toward the ragamuffin, only to pause with paling face as he turned abruptly aside and entered into a rambling conversation with her mother.

Who and what were these people?

While Sleek Sam is ministering to the broken head of Randal Talfourd; while Hector Ajax is holding the wife of the injured man in close converse which her native politeness will not permit her to terminate as abruptly as she might wish; while the lovely daughter of a beautiful mother is covertly watching the half-averted face of the odd old fellow, trying to solve her doubts or confirm her hopes; while all are so busily engaged, let us take a glance at the past record of those who have more or less prominent parts to play in this, our drama of wild life in the land of gold and silver.

Randal Talfourd was a Southerner by birth and education. State pride was a legacy which was religiously banded down from father to son, ever since that State existed, and when the ugly clouds of civil war drooped over the land, the hot-blooded Carolina youth forgot the Union, forgot all save that his native State needed his strong arm. Father, son, cousins, even to the most distant relative sprung to arms at the first alarm, and those who did not fall on the field of battle, in the prison-pens or on the weary march, fought until the last faint hope was gone. And one—this same Randal Talfourd, a grim, bronzed veteran though still scarce more than a youth in actual age—fought on long after the most slender chance of success was wiped out.

With a handful of others, stern and defiant as himself, he made his way out of the toils, marching toward the setting sun, then turning his face toward Mexico. They had no definite end in view; they were simply resolved never to bow their proud heads to that last humiliation.

"They may wipe us from off the face of the earth, but they will never hear the word surrender from our lips!"

It was only a small squad of men—all that was left alive and uncaptured of Colonel Randal Talfourd's last regiment. In those days of glorious triumph and wide-spread exultation, who was to waste a thought on that pitiful handful?

If pursuit was made, it was unsuccessful. The devoted adherents of the Lost Cause crossed the border in safety, and then for the first time they paused to consult on their future course of action. Fighting and camp-life had become a sort of second nature to them, and remember-

ing how long and eagerly the eyes of the hard-pressed South were turned toward Europe, it was perfectly natural for them to offer their services to Maximilian; none the less readily that they could not avoid seeing and realizing how frail and uncertain his cause was growing.

The work was hot and deadly enough even for their war-hardened natures, but they never flinched or lost faith in the desperate cause they had adopted as their own. Then came the swift-falling blows of bitter black treachery which found a tragic culmination on the morning of July 19, 1867, when the once emperor was butchered by repeated volleys from the guns of his clumsy executioners.

Almost by a miracle, Randal Talfourd escaped the doom which had overtaken so many of his comrades, and it was many a day after that before he could call his life his own.

Despite the fast and hot work which he was so often called upon to perform, all was not warfare and bloodshed with the still young Southron. By a curious chain of events, far too long and intricate to find a detailed account here, he had met and won the love of a Spanish maiden, only child of one of the bitterest enemies to the reign of Maximilian. It was rough and perilous times for making love, for wooing and wedding, but for all of this, and more, the gallant young Southron found opportunity.

In addition to a hostile parent, there was at least one desperate rival, who sought time and time again to remove his favored rival by bullet or steel. Failing this, and backed by the stern authority of the father, the Spanish lover resolved to first wed, then woo, the naughty maid. And for a time it seemed as though success was about to crown his efforts, so far as giving him a bride; but then, like young Lochinvar, he to whom the fair Ysabel had surrendered her love, dashed upon the scene at the head of a trusted few of his hardy rough-riders, and leaving the gayly-dressed bridegroom lying senseless or dead on the floor of the church, rode out again, with the bride clinging to his bosom.

A long, hard, merciless chase; then escape; and before his brief furlough expired, Randal Talfourd left his fair bride on American soil, and returned to faithfully play his part in those tragic days when the star of the emperor went down in blood.

At long intervals the soldier managed to visit his wife, and when he returned, never, as they both believed and hoped, to return to the soil of Mexico, there was a little daughter to share their love and care.

Randal Talfourd had gathered together some money in those closing days, and retreating far from the land where he had so audaciously won a living, breathing treasure, he settled down to enjoy life in peace and tranquillity, after those years of stern and deadly work.

Not in the States, for despite the years which had passed since the star of the Confederacy went down forever, Randal Talfourd was still a rebel, still unreconstructed. He felt that he had no country now, and his dearest wish was to gather sufficient wealth to take him and his beyond the seas to a land which he could adopt without such a bitter heart-burning as ever was his when he thought of his old home in the sunny South.

It was this restless longing that finally led him to place his wife and daughter in a quiet home in Denver, and strike out into the heart of the mining regions, where a propitious fortune might reward his busy seekings, at a single lucky stroke.

It was a trying, wearing life, and as the years passed by without bringing him perceptibly nearer the longed-for goal, they showed upon the man, and he was growing old before his time. In vain his loved one besought him to yield to fate, and take life as it came, only so that they might be together. He had never surrendered, even when the odds showed most heavily against him, nor would he yield now. The strange, never-dying fever which claims the gold-hunter as its victim, sooner or late, was boiling in his veins, and with brief visits to his family, Randal Talfourd toiled on and on.

And then, when the little Lois was rapidly growing up to a most fair womanhood, fortune began to smile upon the man who so doggedly pursued her.

So many disappointments had followed to dash his wildest hopes, that Talfourd kept his secret even from those who had the right to share his perfect confidence. He would not again raise their hopes, only to have them rudely shattered with his own, when "the bottom should fall out" of this "show."

So he argued in his own heart, and right well he kept his secret, though day after day, month after month the bright prospect grew surer. And then the day came when he knew that his fortune was made at last!

His lucky discovery proved a true lead, and being the first on the ground, he gathered in the cream before wind of the "new discovery" was spread to the four winds.

He called his mine "The Lost Cause," with a sentiment that was something more than the grim humor it appeared on the surface. And when the money-mad seekers came pouring in to build up a "city" near the new discovery, it

was through his influence that the growing place was named DIXIE.

Even then, when he knew that that dingy, ugly hole in the ground among the foot-hills was worth a fortune whenever he felt inclined to place the stock upon the market or sell it outright, Randal Talfourd could not bring himself to fully unbosom himself to his wife and daughter. He resolved to call them out to him by rail, and meeting them at New Babylon the nearest station to Dixie, and conducting them to the mountain town, let them make the discovery for themselves.

So the important letter was sent, and mounting his horse the day before that on which he knew his family would arrive at New Babylon, the mine-owner rode gayly away from Dixie.

He expected to reach his destination late that same evening, but an accident which partially crippled his horse and sprained his own ankle too severely to permit him to complete the journey on foot, so delayed him that it was nearly four-and-twenty hours later than he expected, when at length he drew near the town.

What followed, the reader already knows.

Samuel Oswald was one of the first to strike Dixie when the true value of the new "find" was realized. Who he was or from whence he originally came, no man appeared to know save himself, and he never spoke of his own affairs.

Handsome, of good address, clearly an educated man, Oswald rapidly gained the golden opinions of nearly all the more prominent citizens of Dixie, none the less readily that his musical voice, his suave manner and his genial smile seemed to be habitual to him. True, he did no work for his living, except to manipulate the pasteboards; but in a mining community, so long as he seems "on the square," a gambler is considered just as good as any other man.

But in one unlucky day for themselves, a couple of "hard nuts" began to crowd the one whose gentle manners and unvarying politeness had already gained him the sobriquet of Sleek Sam; and then the devil that lay hidden beneath that smooth exterior burst forth in all its deadliness.

There was a double funeral the next day, and at the head walked Sleek Sam, cool, calmly smiling, gentle as ever.

Other adventurers came into town, and it began to be whispered about that Sleek Sam was in reality one of the "toughest cases" so far as grit and fire-eating propensities were concerned, to be found in all the wide West. And then, too, though no one seemed to know just who originated the expression, an ugly title became linked to the one he already bore: that of "The Devil of the Mines."

He seemed more like a good Samaritan, just now, as he bent over the wounded patient, his fingers gentle and tender as those of a loving woman; and so the two women thought as they watched his ministrations to their loved one.

Regally beautiful was Ysabel Talfourd, though a mother for full sixteen years. A perfect type of the Spanish beauty of blue blood; dark yet pure; proud and haughty, with passions that could glow and boil like molten lava in time of need, yet loving and gentle with those who claimed her affections.

A miniature type of her taller mother, with a positive resemblance to her handsome father as well, Lois Talfourd was a fully developed woman at sixteen. Her figure was absolute perfection: her face was lovely as an artist's dream—a face such as baffles description from the most skillful pen.

"There!" exclaimed Sleek Sam, drawing back as he finished his self-imposed task. "You are all right now, Mr. Talfourd. Your headache will disappear before the sun rises, and only for the bits of plaster, you would not know that your head had received such a rude salute."

"It would have been worse only for you," gratefully uttered the mine-owner, grasping his hand. "I have not yet thanked you as I could wish for your brave efforts in my behalf."

Sleek Sam gripped the hand, then dropped it with a low, soft laugh as he replied:

"You have taken up the tune of our worthy friend, Hector Ajax, who will insist on shifting the honor on my shoulders—"

He ceased speaking with something very like a frown as he glanced around the room, and hastily added:

"But you must have much to talk over with each other, and I will intrude no longer. I will see you in the morning, no doubt. Ladies, your servant," and bowing low, he retreated from the room, unheeding if he heard the expostulations of Talfourd.

With swift step he passed along to the hall, where he saw the thin, skinny Mexican host curled up on a skin, as though sound asleep. A sharp touch of the foot brought him to his feet, grinning wolfishly and showing his teeth.

"Where is that old man?" muttered Sleek Sam, the dim hall-lamp showing his brows contracted, his eyes gleaming.

"Gone! If you want him, seek him," was the surly reply.

The deep frown vanished as though by magic, and a low, smooth laugh came from the thin lips.

"Took to the brush, the pitiful coward! Well, perhaps that is the best place for the poor fool. And you, Diego Zarate, prepare a bed for me. I will be back shortly."

"You'll waste your time, then," growled the human wolf. "I've no spare room for you to-night."

"Then make room, if you have to bunk in the kennel yourself, dog," was the placid reply, as Sleek Sam bit off the tip of a cigar and fumbled in his pocket for a match.

The skinny hand dropped to the hilt of a knife, but as it flashed forth, Sleek Sam caught his wrist and tore the gleaming weapon away. The curse on the man's lips was stifled, and as though that touch cowed him, he bowed his head, shivering.

"You will watch for me, Diego? And have a good bed?"

"Yes, master!" gasped the Mexican, his eyes drooping.

"All right. I'll not keep you up very late," said Sleek Sam, turning from the house with a short, careless laugh, leaving the Mexican behind him, trembling like a leaf.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE ROSE.

At least one pair of eyes noticed the departure of Hector Ajax, however that action might have escaped the usually keen and comprehensive vision of Sleek Sam.

From the moment when the old ragamuffin had so adroitly effected that transfer from his dingy paw to her white hand, Lois Talfourd watched him closely, almost tremblingly, striving to read the truth behind that hairy mask, now doubting, now convinced that she had penetrated the mystery.

She strove to obtain a word in semi-privacy with the old man, but as though bent on defeating her wishes, he hung close to the side of the mother, his tongue wagging glibly, and almost without cessation. Then, as Lois still persisted, he fixed her gaze with his, then cast a swift, meaning look at her tightly clenched hand, as he tapped his own hollow chest, nodding shortly, but meaningly.

With her cheeks flushing vividly, Lois turned aside to act on the hint thus conveyed, slipping the tiny notelet into her bosom; and when she turned around once more, the curious old ragamuffin had vanished.

It was not until after the hasty departure of Samuel Oswald, that Lois obtained an opportunity for reading the few words contained in that tiny missive. Softer grew the flush on her cheeks, and brighter shone her glorious eyes, as once more the bit of paper found its warm resting-place.

Not many minutes later, a figure shrouded in a light shawl, emerged from the rear door of the dingy house, and with a hasty, apprehensive glance around, glided rapidly toward a clump of trees and undergrowth standing a few rods distant.

When nearly at the edge of the shadows cast by the timber, the veiled figure paused, as though with failing courage, but then as a low, trilling whistle made itself heard, Lois Talfourd sprang impulsively into the gloom, to find herself clasped in a close embrace.

"Willard!"

"My own!"

What followed, was couched in lover's language, which common type can scarcely render articulate, or do justice to. The friendly shadows overhung them. They believed their rendezvous, like their mutual love, a secret to all the world besides. Heart to heart, lip to lip, loving and true; let them be happy while they may, for already the storm-clouds are lowering, and the cunning coils of the destroying serpent are drawing closer and closer about them.

There was more of prose than poetry in the life of Willard Yorke, until fate brought about a meeting between him and Lois Talfourd, the daughter of the soldier of fortune.

The son of "poor but honest parents," who vainly sought in the West the fortune which was denied them in the East, Willard was left an orphan at an early age, and found that he must "rustle for a living," or starve to death.

The last alternative possessed slight attractions for a stout, healthy, growing lad, and Willard was not long in finding work sufficiently paying to keep body and soul together. And while sturdily performing his duty, he kept a very keen, honest eye wide open, looking out for something better.

This he was not long in discovering, and step by step, the energetic lad began to climb up the ladder his less enterprising parents had failed to mount above the lower round.

From sheep-herder to cowboy; from working for wages to setting up in business for himself, though in a very humble way: from poverty to comparative wealth—these were the steps by which Willard Yorke took one after the other before he gained his majority. And with each

succeeding year after that mile-post in life was passed, his little fortune increased until, at the date of this story, it had assumed quite respectable proportions.

It was during a flying trip to the bustling city of Denver that Willard Yorke made what he considered his luckiest stroke, and it came about after this fashion:

It was early evening of one summer day, and Lois Talfourd was returning home from a visit to one of her school girl friends when a man, tall, dark, of middle age, and not unhandsome at the first glance, persisted in pressing his company upon her, despite her unconcealed dislike.

This was not the first time by many that the same man had caused much annoyance to the girl by his fulsome attentions on the street, though thus far she had as often managed to give him the slip without making a scene. But now, clearly under the influence of liquor, the Spanish-looking fellow persisted in attempting to draw her arm through his, whispering his disgusting compliments in her ear. And when she shrunk away, he strove to touch her red lips with his own.

With an angry, panting cry, Lois struck the whisky-inflamed face with her clinched fist. A savage curse parted his lips, and showing his white teeth, the rascal caught her lithe, quivering form in his arms, drawing her to his bosom.

"You beautiful little demon!" he hissed, as he lifted her clear of the ground and made one step toward the dark alley. "If fair means fail, we'll try—"

Just what, never crossed his lips.

A grip of steel closed around his throat, and a hard fist was dashed between his eyes, once, twice, thrice, the last time with a force that tore his throat from those muscular fingers and hurled him twice his length away. His carcass struck the ground with the dull, heavy thud that marks the fall of a senseless mass, and he lay there without even a quiver to show that a particle of life remained in him.

Thus it was that Willard Yorke first met Lois Talfourd.

He accompanied her home and received the thanks of her mother, as well as her own. His honest, manly face was his passport at first, but then the discovery was made that he and they were acquainted with more than one of Denver's citizens, and by invitation Willard Yorke paid repeated visits to the house of the Talfourd family.

And not only that, but the young couple, favored by that complaisant chance which smiles on all deserving lovers, met quite as frequently on the streets, and when at last Mrs. Talfourd took the alarm, it was too late. Love vows had passed between the young couple, and Willard Yorke made full confession, asking the hand of the blushing Lois in marriage.

Proud and haughty, a most devout worshiper of blue-blood, and knowing that her husband fully shared her sentiments, the lady mother coldly declined the proposed honor, and when the young couple tried to shake her resolution, she sternly forbade Yorke the house, and even placed Lois under guard.

For a few days the young man hovered around the prison which inclosed his lady-love, meditating desperate acts of daring and devotion, but then his brain grew cooler. He obtained an interview with Mrs. Talfourd, and frankly told her that his love for Lois was the one passion of his life. It would never grow weaker, let the obstacles be what they might, and in the end he meant to win the prize. At the same time, his business interests demanded his presence, and he was forced to leave town for a brief time. When affairs were arranged at his ranch he would return and make one more appeal. If that was refused, then he would seek out the father and make still another plea. After that—

Coldly she refused to hear more, and Willard Yorke took his departure from the house and from Denver as well.

Within a week a hastily-written letter found him, in which Lois told him of the message they had received from Randal Talfourd, calling them to him at once. Never mind the rest: enough that the same train that conveyed Lois and her mother away from Denver, also carried Willard Yorke, carefully disguised.

After that first fond greeting, and still nestling within his strong, yet gentle embrace, Lois briefly detailed what had occurred since their last meeting, ending with a little laugh:

"I'm so glad that you have taken off that hideous disguise, Willard! Actually, the first glance made me shudder with a strange aversion, even while I knew that the seemingly old and ignorant ruffian had risked his life in defense of dear father!"

Willard Yorke started sharply and his fond embrace grew less close, but it was not because of the half-reproachful, half-laughing words she uttered. He fancied he heard the sound of a cautious footstep among the shadows, and hurriedly whispering to her, he turned and crept silently away.

Trembling, scarcely comprehending what was

the matter, Lois stood there in the shadows, barely choking back a little cry of terror as her lover once more reached her side.

"You came so like a ghost that it frightened me!" she murmured, yielding to the arm that stole lovingly around her lithe waist. "Why did you leave me so abruptly?"

"I fancied I caught the sound of a footstep in the bush behind us, but I was mistaken."

"Ob, Willard, if it should be—"

"But it is not, pet," was his soothing reply, as his lips caressingly touched her fair brow. "And yet, dear one, I would hardly repine if discovery should come—save for your sake. I feel like a thief in the night, striving to steal something to which I have no right. It must end, Lois!"

Closer she clung to him, trembling.

"What do you mean, Willard?"

"That the time has come when I must act the man," was the firm response. "Your father is here, and I must see him. It was to prepare you for this that I begged you to meet me here this evening. In the morning I will call on him, and frankly ask him to give you to me. He can only refuse, and if he should, the situation will be no worse than it is now."

For a brief space there was silence between them. Willard fancied his decisive speech had given her offense, and once more his lips gently brushed her brow.

Impulsively her arms were wound around his neck, and in earnest, agitated tones she murmured:

"I know the course you indicate is the most noble and honest, but still I fear. They are so proud—so haughty to all save silly me. I fear they would refuse to listen."

"Still it must be done, pet," was the quiet response. "We cannot go on like this forever. The longer it is postponed, the more difficult it will be to take the plunge."

"It may be; but I beg of you to give me a little more time—to wait for a more favorable opportunity. Give me a little more time to make my confession, and show him how wholly my happiness is bound up in you. Surely he will not refuse when he knows all—especially after you so nobly risked your life in his defense only this night!"

Willard Yorke drew back his head a little in order to gaze keenly into her tear-dimmed eyes.

"You talk in enigmas this evening, little one!" he exclaimed, in perplexed tones. "What do you mean? In his defense—risked my life? When?"

With a low, soft laugh Lois drew closer to him, tapping his lips with the tips of her fingers.

"It was well played, you silly boy, and deceived even my eyes, keen as they are. And yet—when I first heard that voice, it startled me, and I looked around for you. It was like, yet unlike yours. But when I heard it come again from those lips—or rather from out that mass of shaggy, grizzled hair, I was ashamed of myself. The ideal! My handsome, stately lover—that hideous creature! Ha! ha!"

"Lois! do you mean—"

"Hector Ajax, the gallant brave—the handsome cavalier! I suspected it from the very first, but when you slipped that note into my hand, I knew I was right. You carried out the character right faithfully, but for my sake, dear, do select a more appropriate one. You know I love you dearly—with all my life and soul—but my self-esteem would not long survive if I had to whisper such a confession to Hector Ajax!"

Softly her merry laugh bubbled up, and though Willard echoed it in the same guarded tones, there was a trace of seriousness in his voice as he spoke again:

"Tell me just what happened, dearest. How did Hector—how did I serve your father? Nay, never open your eyes like that, but gratify me, please. I will explain, after."

Sobered, she scarcely knew why, Lois complied, giving a hasty but clear account of the adventure which had befallen Randal Talfourd on his way to meet his family, and of all that took place at the house of Diego Zarate.

Dim and uncertain though the light was around them, Lois could see that a slight smile was playing around the lips of her lover, and there was a trace of pettishness in her tones as she added:

"Now, sir, I have obeyed, and it is your turn to give an explanation of your conduct."

"Hector Ajax, as you call him, pet, is a jolly good fellow, as the world goes, and I believe he would go almost as far to serve you or yours as even I could; but for all that, I beg of you to be guarded while in his company, and never give him what belongs to me alone!"

"Willard, what do you mean?" she stammered, anxiously.

"That you have been deceived, dear Lois—or, rather, that you have deceived yourself," was his laughing response. "This is the first time I have had a chance to speak to you since your arrival at New Babylon. I did not risk my life to save that of your father—worse luck for us!"

CHAPTER VI.

DIEGO TAKES ONE DROP TOO MUCH.

"WILLARD—you are jesting!"

"Indeed I am not, little one," was the earnest reply, as the young ranchero drew the form of the surprised, agitated maiden closer to him. "I can understand how you came to fall into the error, knowing as you did the I must be near you, and in disguise, but—"

"Then who is he? That man—that one who gave me that note from you?"

Her unsteady tones told how greatly this unexpected disclosure had shaken her nerves, but that her confidence in her lover had not been weakened in the least, was amply proven by the manner in which she yielded to his caresses.

"Hector Ajax Rivers, Esquire; a weary pilgrim whose sole aim in life seems to be a longing to get out of the wilderness and to hunt his hole," laughed Willard.

"I never heard you mention his name before."

"Naturally; since I formed his acquaintance since we left Denver," was the light response.

Again Lois started and drew back her head far enough to enable her to look full into the eyes of her lover. Dim and uncertain though the light was, it afforded a chance for her to see that the young ranchero was in earnest now.

"A stranger! And you confided—oh, Willard!"

Yorke was thankful, just then; for the friendly gloom. His face flushed hotly as he divined the reproof she meant to convey, more from her tone than the words her lips uttered.

"You think I have been rash in trusting even this much of our precious secret to a stranger?"

"No—I trust you in this, as I have in all else!" was her impulsive reply. "I will not believe that you have acted unwisely, and yet—"

"Your reason tells you that I have," interposed Yorke, with a short laugh. "Listen, little one, and you shall judge."

"We had hardly left Denver, before I came within an ace of being left behind, for good and all. My foot slipped on the platform as I was passing from one car to the other, and in such an awkward manner that I could not have saved myself from going down between the wheels. I know that when I tripped I was alone on the platform; and yet a friendly hand caught me by the arm before I touched the track, and lifted me out of danger. That hand belonged to the old man you have seen as Hector Ajax."

"Heaven bless him for it!" murmured Lois, her moist lips touching his, her frame trembling in his embrace.

"And I certainly did not curse him for interfering to save my life without waiting for an introduction," laughed Yorke, preferring to view the matter in a humorous light. "We went into the smoker together, and naturally fell into conversation. He was an odd-looking genius, as you have noticed, and almost from the first, I felt positive he was playing a part, if not actually in disguise."

"I rather think he read my doubts, for before long it came out, quite naturally, in the course of our conversation, that he knew several of my friends in Denver and on the cattle ranges. To draw him out still more completely, I showed him some of the letters and papers I carried, and then he favored me after the same fashion. In strict confidence he told me that he was a detective, hunting for a great criminal, who was believed to be somewhere among the mines. And then he said that his first objective point was Dixie."

"Where we are going—our new home!"

"Precisely. And that, with his papers, scattered the last of my doubts—if doubts they may be called."

"And yet—might not he have forged those papers?" hesitated Lois, conscious of a vague dread of coming evil, and connecting it with the strange old man, she could scarcely have told why.

"Barely possible, of course," laughed Yorke. "But why should he have taken all that trouble? And what could he hope to gain by it? For of course he could not have foreseen my clumsiness which resulted in our getting acquainted."

"I don't know," Lois slowly replied. "And yet—I cannot help wishing that you had never given him even this much of your confidence. From the first glimpse of him, he impressed me strangely. When I believed him to be you, in disguise, I accounted for it in that manner, but now—I do not know what to think!"

"Think as I do: that he is a man on whose friendship and fidelity we can place implicit dependence," quickly replied Yorke. "I did not give him my good faith until my mind was entirely satisfied. Even then, I told him but little that could serve him, if he should turn out to be an enemy instead of a friend."

"You warned me in your note, to be particularly careful about awakening the suspicion of your mother. It was very hard to keep away from you during all that long journey, but I would not run counter to your wishes, hoping for a better opportunity to see and speak with you, when once we left the cars. Instead, I

found New Babylon even worse. To see you in person, to arrange an interview, would have almost certainly betrayed our secret to your mother. As the last hope, I concluded to trust my new friend, and gave him that note to deliver, telling him just sufficient to make him understand the necessity of caution and secrecy in doing so.

"It was a strange chance that led to his meeting and proving of service to your father—would that the opportunity had been mine!"

Lois was silenced, if not convinced, by the arguments of her lover, but his last words were heartily echoed by her.

"It seemed really providential, when I believed that man was you, in disguise, for such a service would have opened a road straight to the heart of my mother; and with her to plead with us, or even neutral, the rest would have been easy."

"Easy or hard, it must come to a point, sooner or later," said Yorke, with quiet firmness. "I am not used to work under cover, and though I know I am far from being deserving—"

A soft hand covered his mouth and cut his words short, while the red-ripe lips gave an indignant little murmur.

"It is true, little one, for all that," persisted Yorke. "No man living is worthy of such a prize, but since I have been fortunate enough to win your love, I am just conceited enough to believe that I can come as near the standard as the next best. My record is clean, let it be inspected never so closely. I am young, stout and healthy. I have a little money in bank, more in good stock, and my income steadily increasing each year. I can provide a wife with a good home, and all the comforts she can wish for. Add to this, that you love me, and I cannot see why I should be ashamed to meet your father face to face and ask your hand of him in marriage."

"It is all true, and yet—do not be hasty, Willard," the maiden pleaded. "To-morrow we will leave this place for Dixie. If she is not doing so at this very moment, mother will tell him of our love while we are on the road, or immediately after we arrive at our new home. I will know when she has spoken, by his face, even if he does not question me about it at all. And then—when the ice is fairly broken—I can talk to him freely. I will tell him all; how dearly we love each other; how true and noble you are—"

Yorke playfully sealed her lips just then.

"As for my good qualities, let him make the discovery for himself, pet. He will be more apt to believe in and appreciate them, than if he has cause to suspect I am holding aloof while a special pleader is trying to influence the jury."

"But you promise? You will give me my way in this?"

The young ranchero hesitated for a brief space before replying. His frank, impetuous nature revolted from playing such a part, but his love for the fair girl was so great that he felt that he could deny her nothing.

"I promise, Lois," he uttered, gravely. "You shall have your will in this, as in all else, so far as I am concerned. I will wait patiently until after you have reached your destination, and have had time to do your share of pleading. But then there must be no further delay—no more procrastination. Frankly, as man to man, I will call on your father and plead my suit. If he yields his consent, it will be a sacred duty to see that he never has cause to regret his great generosity, through any failing of mine. If he refuses—"

"He will not, when he learns how dearly I love you, Willard!" passionately murmured Lois.

"Heaven grant you may prove a true prophet, darling!" and the two forms seemed to blend into one, 'neath the friendly cover of the shadowing trees.

There was silence for a few moments, when York spoke:

"I will manage it so as to keep an eye on your party during the trip to Dixie, pet, and so be on hand should any danger threaten you by the way. I will try and disguise myself so as not to awaken suspicion, should chance or awkwardness on my part bring me too close to those charming black eyes of your—our—mother."

"And that man—you will be cautious? Don't trust him too thoroughly, Willard. I cannot explain why, but ever since you convinced me that I had made a mistake in thinking him you, the very thought of him causes the blood to run cold in my veins! I feel that he is to work us some bitter evil—"

There came a sudden crackling sound, seemingly from the dense foliage directly above them, and with a swift strong motion, Willard Yorke swept the form of the maiden aside and behind him, just as the crashing sound redoubled, and a dark shape fell or leaped from the tree beneath which they had been standing.

It fell too heavily, and with not enough elasticity for the body of a wild beast, and as it struck the ground, something very like a savage curse accompanied the grunt of angry pain and surprise, drawn forth by the heavy shock.

Lithe and active as a panther, Willard Yorke leaped upon the unmasked eavesdropper, and pinned him to the ground. Dim though the light was, he caught a glimpse of bare steel, and only a snake-like twist of his body kept the vicious weapon from finding its way between his short-ribs. As it was, the razor-like edge cut through his clothes, slightly gashing his skin, as the tight-clinched fist struck against, and then glanced from his side.

Quick as thought itself, the young ranchero shifted his grasp, pinning the armed hand with his left, while his right hand descended full upon the rising face, knocking back the head of the would-be assassin, until it thumped again upon the hard ground. A savage twist flung the knife from the partially benumbed hand, and then, with knee pressing heavily upon the heaving chest, Willard Yorke held the wretch harmless by the throat, as he muttered sternly:

"You scoundrel! what are you doing here?" "Mercy, señor! Spare me!" came in cowed and choking accents from the almost throttled wretch.

Husky and uncertain though the tone and words both were, they were sufficiently plain to betray the speaker.

"The Mexican!"

"Diego Zarate!"

The last words leaped from the lips of Lois Talfourd, as the familiar tones broke the spell of fright which had taken possession of her, and acting from impulse rather than reason, she sprang forward and caught the arm of her lover, crying:

"It is Diego—our host—do not kill him!"

Of his own accord Yorke had slackened his grip on the throat of the Mexican, as soon as he recognized the voice, and inhaling a husky, rattling breath, the fellow gasped:

"Do not kill—I meant no harm, señor; I call all the blessed saints to witness my innocence!"

"What were you doing skulking and spying around here? Why did you climb that tree? Speak out, you cur!" sternly demanded the young ranchero, tightening his grasp on the skinny throat for a moment, then slackening it again, with a shake.

"Mercy, señor!" quavered the trembling wretch, lying resistless beneath that heavy knee and firm grip on his throat. "I cannot speak—you are crushing in my ribs—smashing my windpipe! Oh, I am a dead man!"

A little cry of mingled fear and compassion broke from the lips of the maiden as these piteous words, husky, rattling, came from the throat of the detected eavesdropper, for she believed that her strong young lover was fatally injuring the poor wretch in his just indignation. With a sobbing cry, she again grasped Yorke's arm, and under her influence, his knee was removed and his grasp slackened still more.

With a snake-like twist and squirm, Diego Zarate broke away from his captor, and rolling swiftly over and over until his hand grasped the bared blade as it glittered in the edge of the moonlight, he leaped to his feet just as Willard Yorke sprang toward him.

With a savage snarl, the desperate wretch struck full at the throat of the young ranchero, only to be again foiled by the marvelous quickness of his antagonist.

One arm warded off the blow, striking the forearm of the bloodthirsty Mexican with such force as to almost paralyze it for the time being, then out shot the clinched right hand, and Diego Zarate went down before its might like a bullock felled by the pole-ax of a butcher.

With a low, gasping cry, Lois Talfourd sunk to her knees, covering her eyes as she saw how nearly her interference had resulted in the death of her lover. Yorke raised her in his arms, and touching her lips, laughed away her fright.

"I'm all right, pet, and I reckon I've drawn the teeth of that coyote for the present. One kiss—so! Now hasten back to the house, before you are missed."

"But—you will not—"

She could not utter the words, but the look she cast toward the Mexican, whose upturned face showed clearly in the moonlight, though his body was shrouded in gloom, together with the shiver which ran through her frame, told plain enough what it was she meant.

Willard hastily released her, for he saw that the eyes of the Mexican were opening, and with one leap he was beside him, rapidly running his hands over his person in search of concealed weapons. None were found, however, and dragging him back into the darkness, Yorke held him fast to the ground by the pressure of one foot, while he spoke to Lois:

"Veil your face, and speak guardedly, pet. It may be that the sneaking cur has not yet recognized you. If so—"

"Whether so or not, Willard, you must spare his life," quickly interjected the maiden, but not neglecting his warning. "Rather than have your hand stained with blood, I would dare all now, and myself confess my imprudence in meeting you here by night!"

"His life is safe enough, for all me," was the quick response; "but if he means mischief to you, I'll take good care that his tongue is locked

fast until after you are out of his reach. He must not tell your parents what he has this night learned, if I have to mount guard over him all night!"

"Make him promise not to tell!"

Standing with his foot still holding the eavesdropper pinned to the ground, Willard Yorke drew the maiden to his manly breast, and warmly pressed her lips, then gently removed her clinging arms from around his neck as he whispered:

"It shall all be as you wish, little one; but you must go, now. I will be watching over you on the journey, and arrange some method of communicating with you, when the trip is over. Good-night—and God bless you!"

With a little sobbing cry that told how hard it was for her to part with him, Lois obeyed, shrouding her face and head in her dark mantle and gliding swiftly toward the house.

The young ranchero watched her until he saw her vanish among the deep shadows at the rear of the house, then he turned his attention to the wretch who trembled beneath his foot.

"Get up, Diego Zarate," he muttered sternly, removing his foot, but standing ready to foil any attempt at escape, should the unmasked spy endeavor to break away as before. "Now what have you got to say for yourself, my honest fellow?"

Slowly and fearfully the cowed rascal rose to his feet, standing with bowed head before the young ranchero, trembling in every limb, as though counting on nothing less than death.

"It was a mistake, señor!" he stammered. "A terrible mistake! I call all the saints—"

"You can lie fast enough without their assistance, Diego, so if you please we'll let them rest for this occasion. In one word—what led you to spy on us here? Speak up—and tell the plain truth, or I'll slit your throat from ear to ear with your own knife."

"I did not spy—"

"Careful, Diego! Wasn't it you that took a tumble out of the tree over our heads? Remember the knife!"

"I do—I will tell all, if you only listen, señor."

"See that you do, and make it short as you can."

"I thought it was Paquita—my wife, señor. She is young, while I am old. She has a light mind, and thinks too much of other men. She steals away, sometimes, when she thinks I am off my guard, and then laughs at me and tells bold lies when I question her about her doings. I caught a glimpse of a woman stealing away from the house, and thinking it was her, I followed, to catch her with a lover, and—"

"Be careful, Diego!" warningly. "You must have found out your mistake before you took the trouble to climb this tree."

"Indeed I did not, señor," eagerly protested the Mexican. "It was so dark, and you spoke so low. I wanted to make sure, and when you heard me stealing closer, I was afraid to try it again after that fashion; so I climbed up the tree—and the thrice-cursed limb must break! My poor bones—ugh!"

Willard Yorke hardly knew whether to believe this story or not. It was plausible enough, all but the tree climbing portion, but still he had some uncomfortable suspicions. He felt, rather than reasoned, that Diego was lying most shamefully; but what could he do?

"Why did you not retreat when you found out your mistake?"

"I was afraid you would hear me," with a shrug.

"Well, now, you want to hear me, and bear my words well in mind, too, unless you are tired of living. What you have this night discovered, will be sudden death to you, if you ever let a hint escape your lips. I swear that I will kill you without mercy if you tell a living soul. You understand?"

"I know nothing—I will say nothing, señor. I swear—"

"Keep your word, or I'll keep mine. Now travel!"

Gladly this hint was acted upon, and Willard Yorke watched the Mexican until he also disappeared within the house. Then he moved slowly away toward the main part of town.

CHAPTER VII.

HECTOR AJAX IN BAD COMPANY.

"AN' it's the ole man that's sayin' of it, gents; the plain, flat-footed, copper-bottomed, red-headed truth is a most mighty good thing fer a critter to hang onto when once he gits a squar' hold. With good ole jes'-so fer a side-pardner, a man ain't gwine fer to be throwed very hefty nur yit often; an' when he does go to grass, he'll git up ag'in as spry an' 'fresned up as though he bed jest sarcumvented a porterhouse-steak an' a he-ole snifter o' rock-an'-rye an' stowed 'em safely below hatches in his grub-hole—yes, sir!"

"Oh, give us a rest!"

For a "dead town," the "Caboose" was doing a remarkable business that evening. The little fracas which had taken place just outside of the "city limits" a couple or so of hours earlier in the evening, seemed to have stirred up the sluggish blood of the New Babylonians,

reminding them of the glorious days of old when their pet city was monarch of all it surveyed, and genuine "fun" lay around in great chunks for all who chose to take a taste.

The men who had sallied forth to investigate the alarm, failing to discover anything of the foot-pads, and reaching the wise conclusion that there was little sport or glory in rushing aimlessly over the rocks and through the thorny bushes by night, without the slightest clew to guide them, returned to town, and dividing up in little squads, sought the saloon of their particular fancy, more for social intercourse than the purpose of "irrigating," however. Willing their hearts, one and all, but very few of their pockets were lined with the most necessary of all evils, and "trust was a dead dog" within the confines of classic Babylon.

Those gentry who favored the "Caboose" with their presence, struck a miniature bonanza, in the shape of our old acquaintance, Hector Ajax. Ragged, poverty-stricken though he seemed, and sourly as the presiding genius of the bottles behind the bar grinned at his squeaking call for "all han's 'round!" the weather-beaten old tramp quickly gave ocular demonstration of his ability to shed gold and silver at will, and feeling that he had been entertaining an angel unawares, Gravy Dick hastened to apologize and sling out his crystal.

Not once, but repeatedly did Hector Ajax call forth the liquid refreshments, as though bent on "making himself solid with the sports," and drinking glass for glass with the rest, he set his tongue free and wagged it nimbly enough.

As already hinted, the worthy tramp had left the town in anything but a heroic fashion, just before the adventure on the road in which he was destined to play such a peculiar part, but there was naught of shame in his grizzled countenance or of hesitation in his voice as he touched upon that subject now, sitting astride a chair, his arms supported by the square-topped back, one fist grasping a half-emptied glass.

His audience was an attentive one, probably on the same principle that insures a respectful silence on the part of a number of horribly bored diners' out while their prosy host is making them pay a long price for the rich viands and rare wines on which they have been gorging, by listening to his droning after-dinner speech.

"No man yit was ever choked to death by tellin' the truth, unless he'd bin playin' crooked aforehan'. It's bin my motter through life, an' whenever I've come chuck up into a nasty mud-hole, I kin lay it to hev' bin strayed a little from the straight path which I take for my sarmon, jes' now.

"Frintsunce; look at me. I come here, a stranger, on the keers. I didn't know nobody an' nobody knowed me. The devil putt it into my fool cabeza fer to putt on heap frills, an' make you all think I was a mighty chief. An' so I did. An' what was the come-out? You know. A little chunk of a boyjest clumb all over me an' made me chaw dirt! An' me big enough an' ugly enough fer to pin back his years an' swaller him at a gulp, not stoppin' to sop him in the skillet, nuther! An' why fer didn't I do it? Ag'in, beca'se I was tryin' fer to play a lie, an' didn't hev the sand fer to back it up.

"The poic says that honest 'fession is heap-good fer the soul, an' from this time henceforward an' so on, yours truly ain't goin' to try to come it when he can't, but is goin' fer to sot onto the bottom which was given to him by them what brung him into this world o' grief an' troubles—be jest is!

"You won't hear me settin' up my claim as chief no more. Any bob-tailed tom-cat with clipped claws an' trimmed toe-nails kin run the town fer all o' me. Ef a man looks at me with blood in his eyes, I'm goin' fer to pick up my heels as fast as the good Lawd 'll let me, an' git out o' the wilderness in a heap hurry—I jest am!

"I'm goin' to putt it in the newspapers an' post it up whar all the ole maids kin see it, that your uncle Fuller ain't on the fight no more. That he's done soured on all sech wanities as them. That he's a coward from A to amper-sand. That they ain't sand enough in his bull corpus fer to strike a match ag'inst. I am. Nur I ain't ashamed to say so, nuther! Why, how kin I help myself?

"I was born that way. It run in the fambly. I could run afore I could walk, an' I hed fuzz on my upper lip afore I could larn any more o' seven-up then to beg. Same way with dad an' mam an' the ole folks afore them, 'way back, the good Lawd only knows how fur!

"Why, the name's enough to tell it all. Rivers. It mak's you think o' somethin' runnin', jest to hear it mentioned! It's all run, from top to bottom."

"An' the biggest part of it is the mouth!" came sotto voce from among the bibulous crowd.

Hector Ajax joined in the coarse laugh which followed this remark, nothing disconcerted.

"An' like all the rest o' the rivers, I got my sheer o' that. Ef I can't do nothin' else, I kin talk—"

"Longer an' louder an' say less, then ary

other he in the wide land!" supplemented the voice, insolently.

"An' stan' more abuse without gittin' up on my ear, you mought 'a' slipped in without makin' your fling any the weaker, pard," laughed the ragamuffin, nodding for the bar-keeper to fill them up again.

It was a cunning stroke of policy on the old man's part, for while their throats were kept well oiled, there was little danger to be dreaded from the ruffians.

"Rivers was the last name, an' 'memberin' all that they hed suffered from it, the ole folks thought they'd change the luck an' make me more of a hero, ef they could; so they tacked on two big names of mighty big fighters in the ole days; an' that's how I come to be called Hector Ajax. But it didn't do no good—Lawd love ye, no sir! Ef anythin' it jest made my heels all the more ticklish an' ready fer to break away. The trouble was, the name wasn't big enough to kiver my hull body. My head an' body is all right; the Hector Ajax tuck effect on them; but the durned Rivers part kerryes my legs. An' the legs kerry the day, every time!

"It was them what run me away when that little chunk of a boy tackled me so ferce, this evenin'. Rivers will run, no matter how often you dam 'em—an' the good Lawd knows I've done a pesky heap more dam'in' on that a'count then I'll ever git fergiveness fer, in this world or the next!

"It was powerful ketchin', too, that skeeriness. It got the better o' the Ajax part o' me afore I got cl'ar o' the town, an' when I hearn that rumpus over yender, it jest swarmed up an' over the Hector part, an' I reckon I went plum' crazy!

"It was git out o' the wilderness an' hunt your hole, you mis'erable sinner! with me then, an' I must 'a' bin so durned bad skeered that I got clean turned around, fer the fust I knowed, thar I was, chuck-up in the middle o' the muss, whar I reckon they was nigh a thousan' o' the bloody-minded critters jest a-cuttin' an' a-slashin' an' a-shootin' an' a-whoopin' an' a-yellin' an' a-cuttin' up Jack in general—the good Lawd deliver me from sech another 'sperience as them!

"Jest look at it ca'mly an' skientifically, gents. Jest close your peepers an' give it a good, squar' think-it-over.

"Thar I was, penned up in the midst o' them rampageous heathen, all jest a-goin' mad fer a drink o' human ge-ore, an' me a pore, lorn coward sech as I tole ye! Jest look at it! Wonder I didn't drop down an' go into a 'nipation fit, fust-off!

"But I didn't. I didn't hev the spar' time. I was penned up so tight I couldn't run no furdur 'thout kerryin' the bull army away onto my shoulders, an' fer that I wasn't able. The Rivers part o' me was played, an' then the Hector an' the Ajax parts come to the front—an' ef they didn't jest loom up, then I wouldn't say so!

"Them heathen fit, an' I fit—all but the Rivers part o' me, you onderstand. An' that was so tight crowded it couldn't git in its work to count any.

"I fit an' I fit! jest sloshed around like a thrashin' machine on a crazy-drunk, an' I laid out more'n twenty o' the p'izen critters afore I got fairly started, an'—"

"Why didn't we find some on 'em, then?" "I hit 'em so hard I knocked 'em clean over into the bresh, an' thar mates kerryed 'em off while we was parleyin' with you—all," promptly explained Hector, with a grin.

He was sitting with his back toward the door and knew nothing of the entrance of two rough-looking fellows who stood in silence listening to his wild gasconading for several seconds, before taking part in the scene. Then one of them swiftly advanced and clapped the old ragamuffin on the shoulder so violently that it wrung a cry of pain from his lips.

With a howling squeak, Hector Ajax leaped forward, overturning his chair as he whirled around, crouching, cowering, the very ideal of fear and misery.

With savage grins, the two new-comers faced him. Stout and muscular, one broad shouldered and heavily built, his face covered with a tangled mat of fiery red hair, his garb that of a down-on-his-luck miner; the other tall, athletic, black and sinister-looking, rigged out in a greasy, ragged suit of Mexican garments.

They were Pueblo Dave and Tomaso Gargulez.

With a knowing wink at the crowd, the former spoke:

"Durned ef it ain't the gospel truth he's givin' ye, gents one an' all! He did lay out anyways one o' the pang, fer me an' my mate here found the critter, cold an' stiff. He's chuck full o' grit, the ole man is—a mericle o' sand an'—"

"No I ain't!" whined Rivers, dolefully. "I'm a bloomin' coward! I didn't fight a durned bi! It was all my lyin', jest to hear myself talk. It wasn't me—it was that Sleek Sam as laid the gent out—I'll take my blessed—"

A heavy hand crushed the battered hat over its wearer's eyes, with a force that caused his knees to give way beneath him. Another stroke brought him to his hands and knees, and with

such a tempting target, another of the boisterous gang could not help swinging forward his heavy cowhide boot with an impetus that sent the moaning, whining tramp turning somersets over and over the dirty floor, until he brought up against the side of the room.

Excited, their worst passions aroused more thoroughly by the sight of a helpless victim, than even with the vile liquor they had swallowed at his expense, the ruffians were about to rush after him, to indulge in further "fun," when Tomaso and Pueblo Dave leaped to the front.

A whispered word, eked out by significant signs and looks accomplished more than their bold front, and with coarse laughter, the others fell back.

Tremblingly, Hector Ajax picked himself up, but his left hand was still touching the floor, when Pueblo Dave snatched a long knife from his belt, and flung it point downward with great force and dexterity, the weapon striking within an inch of the dirty fingers, burying half its length in the soft pine flooring.

"Fer the good Lawd's sake, gents!" gasped the frightened wretch leaping back and upward, bringing his trembling carcass flatly against the wall, "don't be so keerless!"

"Halt!" cried Tomaso, the Mexican, his black eyes glittering like living coals, and his teeth showing whitely below his thin mustaches. "Stand where you are! Move at your peril!"

Stiff and erect, stood the old man, like one suddenly petrified with fear, his eyes glaring wildly toward his tormentors. And then, swift as a flash of lightning, a glittering blade left the hand of the Mexican, and actually pinned a lock of the grizzled hair that floated from the old man's temple to the wooden wall!

"Aha! a brave gentlemen he is!" grinned the Mexican, as he reached a hand toward the crowd for another weapon. "He does not flinch—he is pure game—not a white feather to be found in his plumage!"

"Guard your toe!" yelled Pueblo Dave, hurling a second knife at the feet of the old man.

"Mercy, gents!" gasped Hector, as he swiftly slid his feet apart, and thus escaped the weapon. "I ain't brave—I'm a pore ole coward, an' it was all lies I told ye—ow-wow!"

Another bolt of steel entered the wall with a thud, so close to the left ear that the old man clapped one hand to his head as though believing that organ clipped off clean.

Again Tomaso reached for a knife, which was quickly handed him, and as he drew back his hand, balancing the bright blade, his eyes filled with a deadly light. And then, with a savage snarl, he cast the knife full at the old man's throat!

CHAPTER VIII.

"GIT OUT O' THE WILDERNESS!"

WITH a shrill squeak, Hector Ajax Rivers slid his thin legs wider apart and out from the wall, closing up and sitting down with marvelous rapidity, the shock as his body reached the floor drawing a grunt from his lips. And into the wall, just missing his head, sunk the glittering knife.

Until that moment the half-drunken citizens had looked upon the whole affair as a tit of harmless sport; but now, as the Mexican reached for another knife, his eyes aglow, his voice trembling with deadly passions, they mechanically fell away, not one offering another weapon for the torture.

"A knife—give me a knife!" snarled the ruffian, with an impatient stamp of his foot, his brown, sinewy fingers closing and unclosing like the hungry talons of a vulture. "I'll drive it through his cursed throat and hang him up to dry by the neck! Give me a knife—ten thousand devils!"

"Fer the good Lawd's sake, don't ye do it, gents!" whined Rivers, scrambling to his feet and dolefully rubbing that section of his body which had suffered most by the heavy collision with the floor. "They'll be bloody murder done ef you do! I kin see it in them eyes o' the high-toned gent! An' all 'long o' my durned lyin'! I never killed nobody—"

"You lie, dog!" snarled Gargulez, no longer able to keep up even the hollow pretense with which the exciting scene was inaugurated. "You killed my brother—murdered him like a dog, when he was doing his best to serve—"

"Good-evening, gentlemen!" rung out a clear voice, as a man stepped briskly into the saloon. "Having a nice little circus here all by yourselves, eh?"

The inmates of the Caboose started, showing more or less interest in the appearance of the new-comer, on whose calm, massive features rested a genial smile as his beaming eyes leisurely took in the details of the scene.

Tomaso Gargulez flashed an angry glance over his shoulder, his hand still reaching for a fresh weapon; but as his eyes met that pleasant gaze, he whirled swift as thought and confronted the speaker, showing his teeth in a wolfish snarl.

"Who are you, to interfere with the sport of gentlemen? Look out that you're not called on

to take a part in the game yourself, my fine jack-a-dandy!"

"I want to know!" drawled the new-comer, smiling still more blandly as he put up an eyeglass and gazed into the swarthy, evil face of the Mexican. "Will some of you gentlemen be so kind as to introduce me to this—this—swine?"

His worst passions already up to boiling pitch, Gargulez could not stand this cool insult, and with a cry that would not have disgraced a tiger of his native land, he leaped upon the smiling man, his bony, steel-like claws clutching at his throat. Leaped, but never reached his mark.

Stepping lightly to one side, his adversary made a lightning pass with one foot, tripping the rage and vengeance blinded Mexican up, catching him as he fell headlong, by each wrist. With a peculiar twist, he crossed the arms of his captive, bringing the hands close to their opposite shoulders, holding them thus, from behind, despite the desperate struggles of the cursing, howling ruffian. And the voice that spoke was cool and even as though the sport was resding at ease.

"My dear fellow, you are too impulsive! A hand shake is good enough for me, when I meet a stranger. One would think I was your long lost brother."

"You murdered him—you and that cursed devil in rags!" panted the Mexican. "I'll have the heart's blood of both—"

"You don't say!" laughed his captor, foiling every effort at escape with wondrous ease. "Well, you're quite ugly enough for a vampire, whatever other qualifications you may lack. I suppose you'll let me know when you're going to begin?"

One more desperate, prolonged struggle to tear himself away from that steel-like grip, then the overtaxed muscles of the Mexican relaxed, and darting a fierce glare at his comrade, he gashed:

"Pueblo—curse you! By your oath, I call on you—cut the cursed heretic down! Slash his heart out!"

Pueblo Dave, who had been looking on during the few moments occupied by this queer scene, like one at a loss what steps to take, now leaped swiftly to where the knife first hurled by him at the fingers of Hector Ajax stood half buried in the floor, and tearing it free, he took one long stride toward the man who handled the muscular Mexican so easily. But only one step.

The keen-eyed sport shifted his grasp from wrists to neck and middle, and making a short rush forward, lifted his captive clear of the floor and hurled him like a battering-ram full against Pueblo Dave. Struck in the stomach by the head of his mate, Dave went down like a tenpin before a twelve inch ball, the twain lying in a heap, gasping and half stunned.

"Rip, slap, set 'em up ag'in—all down but ten!" chanted the victor, with a mellow laugh, as he stood, hands on hips, watching the fallen ruffians confusedly rising to their feet.

But a swift change came over him as he saw Pueblo Dave fumbling for a revolver, and out shot both of his white hands, each one claspng a cocked pistol. Sharp and incisive rung out his voice:

"Touch not, my gentle acrobats! Hands empty, or it will be empty skulls in a holy minute! I say so—Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines!"

"An' he's the gent what done all o' the slaughterin' you try fer to lay onto me!" whined Rivers, picking up his battered slouch and holding it with both hands across his breast. "I said I'd take my davy onto it, an' so I will! I was too pesky bad skeered fer to hurt a sick kitten, but he come a-rompin' an' a-chargin' down like a lion on the rampage, an' the scatteration he did make 'mongst them cuttin' an' slashin' fellers, was just turrible fer to look on an' see, it was!"

Sleek Sam never glanced toward the ragamuffin who rattled off this speech so volubly, but kept his glittering eyes fixed upon the two ruffians, his pistols covering them as they stood side by side. It seemed as though those wondrous eyes had magnetized the roughs, for though they slowly crept toward him, they made no effort to draw a weapon or strike a blow.

They came fairly within arm's length of Sleek Sam, before that worthy made a move other than to hold them covered with his pistols as they advanced; but then the weapons appeared to fly back up his sleeves, and his white hands caught their hard paws, shaking them vigorously.

"That's white! forgive and forget!" he laughed in his peculiar, smooth tones, as the citizens looked on with growing astonishment at this unexpected termination to what had looked sure for a graveyard ending. "Barkeep, set 'em up."

But the end was not yet. Gargulez wrested his hand free with a short snarl, his bloodshot eyes glowing again.

"I can't drink while he's calling on me to avenge his murder! Who killed him—my brother, Perico?"

"He did!" squealed Rivers, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, casting many a wistful glance toward the door, but evidently fearing to make a break, as to do so would of necessity carry him within reach of the two truculent roughs who had already treated him so unceremoniously. "I see him do it! He wanted fer to lay it onto me, but I wouldn't hev it so, an' I tole him I'd blow it onto him. He done it!"

"Where did your brother meet his death, and how?" sternly demanded Sleek Sam, his bright eyes catching those of the Mexican. "Was he one of the gang that jumped the stranger out yonder, this evening?"

Tomaso hesitated for a moment, then showed his white teeth in a savage grin as he growled:

"No—he was killed a year ago, hundreds of miles from here. He was an honest man, not a footpad."

"Then I've got nothing further to say; settle your little affairs after your own fashion," and he turned carelessly on his heel toward the bar. "Gentlemen, join me!"

For the most part believing all was over for the present, the ever-thirsty Babylonians followed his lead with a most refreshing unanimity—for neither Gargulez, Pueblo Dave nor Hector Ajax Rivers could properly be called citizens.

The latter, catching at the seeming opportunity, stole a few feet nearer the door, in evident hopes of being able to "hunt his hole," but the two roughs intercepted him.

"Down with him!" grated Tomaso, springing forward.

"Cl'ar the way!" squealed Hector Ajax, wrought up to desperation, lowering his shaggy head and darting blindly forward in the direction of the door. "I'm goin' fer to git out o' the wilderness—ugh!"

So sudden and unexpected was this move of the ragamuffin that before Gargulez could make any attempt to either check or avoid that blind rush, he was struck full in the stomach by the lowered head, the breath fairly knocked out of his carcass as the heavy shock carried him back against Pueblo Dave, tripping him up, both falling to the floor, with Hector Ajax stumbling over them.

"Ow-wow! le' me go—le' me hunt my hole!" he howled, struggling frantically as he lay atop the heap, clawing and kicking, butting heavily with his bullet-like head, the first blow from which knocked the head of Gargulez back as he strove to rise, flattening out his thin nose and causing the blood to fly in all directions.

All eyes turned toward them, the Babylonians almost forgetting their free drinks in their rude delight at the prospect of unlimited "fun," while Sleek Sam, his elbows resting on the bar as he leaned back against it, smiled suavely, his eyes twinkling with pleasant enjoyment.

"Take him off!" howled Pueblo Dave, as plainly as he could articulate with a mouthful of loose teeth, driven from their sockets and half way down his throat by a dash from that terrible head. "Fer God's sake! take 'im off!"

So piteous was the cry, that several of the party started toward the confused heap with the evident intention of separating them, when another character suddenly made his appearance on the scene, leaping across the threshold, pistols in hand, his clear voice ringing out menacingly:

"Back, you cowards! Give the old man fair play, or some of your gang will get hurt—and hurt bad!"

Tall and rather slenderly built in comparison with those burly ruffians, but with the clean, rim lines of a thoroughbred showing in body and limb; with hair of gold hanging in slightly curling locks down to his shoulders; with a neatly-kept mustache and imperial, adorning without concealing his red lips and rounded chin; with blue eyes, now fairly ablaze; with a healthy bronze upon his cheeks, agreeably contrasting with the pure whiteness of his high, broad forehead, now exposed to view by the soft felt hat being pushed back from his brows; with his dress of half-cloth, half buckskin—Willard Yorke looked the *beau ideal* of a plains dandy as he stood there confronting the astonished roughs, pistols in hand.

And unheeding the interruption, Hector Ajax continued to kick and claw and dash his bullet-head against whatever portion of his antagonists' person it could reach, howling:

"Git me room! Quit a-holdin' of me! Le' me go—I'm sick—I want to hunt my hole an' git out o' the wilderness! I'm a pore, broken-down critter, an' I can't do nothin' but run when I'm crowded. Ow WOW!"

With marvelous force and rapidity his shaggy head darted here and there, bruising and battering, seeming as though the repeated blows must certainly crush either his own skull or those of his blinded tormentors.

Willard Yorke evidently feared this, for as he checked the rush of the Babylonians and took a glance at his old friend, he cried out, sharply:

"Enough, Rivers! Let up, man! You're all right now."

With a scramble the ragamuffin rose to his feet, tossing the long hair back from his eyes and glaring wildly about as though ex-

pecting another assault from some quarter. And his tones were weak and quivering as he gasped:

"I *hed* to do it, gents! They hung on an' wouldn't le' me loose, when all I wanted was to git out o' the wilderness an' hunt a hole to crawl into! 'Deed I *jest hed* to do it, gents!"

The placid smile no longer hovered around the thin lips of Sleek Sam as he looked at the two men lying bleeding and motionless on the floor. And his voice was hard as he spoke:

"If you have killed those poor devils, you'll have to stand good for their lives, old codger! It's plain murder!"

A whining howl burst from the lips of the tramp.

"Ow-WOW! *durn sech* a kentry an *double-durn sech* a people! I'm a coward from top to toe, an' yit you all *will* make me out a bloody fighter! I'm goin' fer to levant—"

"Not until this matter is settled satisfactorily!"

"Who set you up as judge?" cried Yorke, sharply. "It was as fair a fight as possible with two men on one. They were squarely whipped, and if you think to harm the old man, you've got to take me in too!"

Swift as thought Sleek Sam sprung into action. Two shots, and the lights went out, shattered by the bullets. Then:

"Take them both, boys!" his voice rung out commandingly.

"Git out o' the wilderness, lad, an' hunt your hole!" came shrilly in the tones of Hector Ajax, as the door was almost burst from its hinges by the swift rush of many men.

A fleeting glimpse was caught of shadowy forms gliding away through the night, but only a low laugh came back in answer to the pistol-shots which Sleek Sam sent after them.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CRAWL OF THE CENTIPEDE.

THE dead of night in New Babylon. The yells, the curses, the pistol-shots, the rushing to and fro of excited men in clumsy obedience to the sharp, stern orders of Sleek Sam, had all died away, and the ruined town assumed a sleepy calm. An occasional light here and there told where some over-sanguine "gin-broker" was wasting midnight oil in the faint hope of corraling a few stray dimes; but the majority of the citizens had retired to their virtuous couches for the night.

The dead of night over the little valley where lies the corpse of Perico Gargulez, slain by the bullet of—whom? Little matter to him, now. Still less to the trio of gaunt wolves who are scratching vigorously around the edges of the massive boulder, their pendent lips drooling freely as they scent the rare feast which lies so near, and yet so far.

The dead of night over the foot marked gravel, over the white boulder with its stains of red blood, where one life was attempted and another taken; the dead of night, but not of night deserted.

One after another, gliding along without sound of voice or footfall, grim phantoms of the night are crossing the narrow strip of moonlight ground, then fading away amid the deeper shades beyond. Each link of the human chain casts a look toward the white boulder as it is passed by, and eyes grow brighter, and teeth close tighter, and more than one hand seeks haft of knife or butt of pistol as their owners recall to mind the cause of that dread oath which was recorded deep in the hearts of all, only a few hours before, in the little valley where the hungry wolves are howling their impatience as they scratch at the barring earth.

On, with its head turned toward New Babylon, creeps this human chain—this gigantic centipede. Rapidly it crosses the strips of moonlight, creeping more leisurely through the deeper shadows, but never ceasing its silent progress until the dilapidated town comes into indistinct view. And the stop is barely perceptible even then.

The head of the centipede rose erect on the little knoll and took a swift survey of the ground in front, then crouched until almost stretched along the earth, once more advancing.

Here and there, picking and choosing where the shadows lay thickest, the human centipede crawled on and on, bending around until it came to rest again in the little grove where Diego Zarate came to grief only a few short hours before; and here the linked reptile silently broke into bits that gathered around him who had served as its head, listening intently as he spoke, in low, guarded tones:

"These cursed heretics turn night into day! The lights are still burning, though the cock has crowed a good hour ago. Yet we can wait no longer. You remember our oath; it must be sacredly carried out, or on our own heads will fall the doom!"

"Let the light burn," came a husky, muffled voice from a pair of thickly bandaged lips. "We kin see to do the work so much the better, an' ef they yelps loud enough fer to roust out the town, I reckon we kin clean them out, too—I do!"

"Our purpose is vengeance, not fighting," was the curt retort of the masked chief. "You and Tomaso have acted the hot-headed fools enough for the entire band—"

"He got his pay, I reckon, nur I ain't so much better off, come to that," growled Pueblo Dave.

"You were sent to spy, not fight; you have no one to blame but yourselves for what has befallen you," tartly.

"Durn it all!" grumbled the burly ruffian, who plainly did not stand as much in awe of the chief as the majority of his mates. "What could I do? Tom see the critter as laid out his brother, an' went fer him, red-hot. Could I go back on a pard? Ef them's the orders, the quicker you kick me out o' the fambly the better I'll like it—so thar!"

"So long as you did not organize the row—"

"Say a hull brass band with a steam pianner throwed in, an' you'll come nigher it! Organ! Yas, an' we two was the little monkeys to make the crowd laugh! Never mind; it's a mighty long rope thet hain't got no knots into it, an' I'll git even with the crowd afore ole Gabriel toots his horn!"

Pueblo Dave had not adhered strictly to the gospel truth in making his report to his chief. True, he had recovered his senses sufficiently to carry off his senseless mate, while the New Babylonians under lead of Sleek Sam were out in hot chase of Willard Yorke and Hector Ajax Rivers, but in accounting for their terribly battered condition, Dave swore by all that was good and bad, they two had been set upon by an overwhelming force of the citizens and shamefully beaten, despite their almost superhuman struggles.

"You shall have revenge, never fear," shortly replied the masked chief, with an impatient wave of his hand, his glowing eyes riveted upon the lights which still shone through the windows in the second story of the hotel kept by Diego Zarate. "But that must take its proper turn. Just now we have more important work to attend to. We can afford to wait no longer. If an alarm is raised, so much the worse for those who think to come to the rescue!"

Rapidly selecting three men from the band, he motioned them to follow him, and glided swiftly across the moonlighted space to the front of the house, where he rapped gently against the door, then, with his men, pressed closely against the wall, the better to foil any cautious reconnoitering from a partly opened door.

Light as the rasp was, it served to arouse the cat-like Mexican, and with a surly growl, the door was gingerly opened a few inches, while he demanded who knocked.

For answer, a strong hand dashed the barrier wide, and then clutched the host by the throat, bearing him backward.

"Silence, dog! One whimper above your breath, and I split your heart into ten thousand pieces!" hissed the masked chief, as he flashed a bare blade before the widely protruding eyes of the Mexican.

Diego evidently placed full faith in this fearful threat, for he lay quiet as a lamb, only for a slight shivering which agitated his limbs, while the followers of the masked chief swiftly bound him hand and foot.

This done, the masked chief passed outside the door and made a silent signal, which speedily brought up the remainder of his force. In guarded whispers he gave them their orders.

He divided the force into nearly equal parts, placing one portion under command of his lieutenant, a lithe, graceful man, who was apparently quite young, though none of his features could be seen for the black mask, with which he, as well as all of the others, was provided.

"You will at once proceed to the chamber of that man, Sleek Sam, as he is called. If his door is locked, burst it open if you cannot pick the lock without alarming him. You must work swift, for they say he is a perfect demon when he is given room to use his weapons. Capture him if you can—if not, kill him with as little noise as may be. Understand!"

Luis Montero nodded coolly.

"Very well. To your work. Pueblo Dave and Garcia will look after the wife of this pig. I will attend to the other party. On, now, and the devil favor you all!"

Swiftly, silently, the black-faces stole up the narrow stairway, and then divided, each party to perform the duty assigned them.

The force led by the chief paused at the door of the chamber in which the Talfourd family were ensconced, and as he bowed his ear close to the key-hole, he could distinguish the low tones of a man speaking. Late though the hour was, the trio had not yet separated, or made any preparations for retiring.

Two years had passed since their last meeting, and now that he was once more with his loved ones, Randal Talfourd could no longer hold to his plan, but was telling them how completely his long-deferred hopes had been fulfilled; that at last they were on the high-road to riches, when their often discussed plans of leaving the land which could never more be to him his country, would finally be carried out.

With a hand of silk and a touch of velvet,

the masked chief assured himself that the door was not locked, slowly turning the knob and standing in readiness to fling wide the only barrier that divided them from their prey.

He had not long to wait. From the other side of the house came a half-stifled cry, then the sounds of a confused but desperate struggle.

He heard a startled exclamation burst from the lips of the mine-owner, and then dashing wide the door, he leaped into the lighted chamber, pistol in hand, closely followed by his black-faced gang.

"Silence!" he cried sternly, as Randal Talfourd glared at him with eyes ablaze. "One word and you die!"

Swift as thought the plucky ex-soldier leaped to the table on which lay his belt of arms, and snatching therefrom a revolver, stood at bay before his startled dear ones.

"Begone! you cowardly whelps!" he grated, covering the tall chief with the pistol. "Git—or I cut loose!"

"Bah!" the masked chief retorted, with a mocking laugh. "Can you kill the devil? Don't be a fool, Talfourd!"

For answer the pointed hammer rose and fell—but only a dull click responded, instead of the death-dealing report. Again and again, with the same result, and the masked chief laughed again as he made a gesture to his men.

With a fierce curse, Talfourd flung the faithless weapon full at the head of the mocking villain, and sprung for another weapon; but the missile was adroitly dodged, and then the black faces were upon their victim, throwing him to the floor, fastening upon hands and arms and legs and feet—a stout man to each member, with others hovering near to lend prompt assistance in case it should be needed.

With a cry of terror, Lois Talfourd shrunk away; but not so her mother. For one brief moment she, too, seemed stupefied, but then, as her husband fell to be covered over with his evil assailants, she plucked a dagger from her hair, and leaped to his rescue.

The masked chief saw the glittering steel as it rose in the firm white hand, aimed at the back of one of the topmost ruffians, and flinging off his serape, he twisted it deftly about the head and shoulders of the Spanish woman, drawing her forcibly backward, then deftly plucking the dagger from her frenzied grasp.

As he acted thus, a warning glance from his glowing eyes gave the clew to those of his men who were as yet unoccupied, and almost before she could realize the fact of the assault, Lois Talfourd was helplessly muffled in a blanket.

Many hands make light work, and despite the desperate struggles of the powerful man, who felt that he was fighting for far more than life, Randal Talfourd was overcome and firmly bound hand and foot. A heavy blanket was wound around his head and shoulders as the black faces arose from their work, lifting him to his feet between them in obedience to a sign from the masked chief.

That worthy resigned the nearly smothered Ysabel to one of his satellites, taking charge of Lois instead.

"Look you, Randal Talfourd, and you, madame. You are helpless in my power, but I would not like to spill your blood, at present. Still, if you compel me to do so, the blame be yours."

"I have taken a great deal of pains to capture you alive and unhurt; why, you shall learn when the proper time comes. In doing so, I am risking the lives of my men, as well as my own, for if the alarm was once given, the citizens would flock to the rescue—of your dead bodies, for I will never yield you with a spark of life remaining in your persons! One shout from your lips may suffice to bring friends to the scene, but that same sound will drive my knife through the heart of your idolized daughter—see!"

He dropped the blanket from the head of his fair captive as he spoke, holding the keen point of his vicious-looking knife against the heaving bosom of the fainting maiden. His men cast off the muffers, giving father and mother the free use of their eyesight.

A groan of baffled fury from the one—a gasping plea for mercy from the paling lips of the other, as they saw the brutal act of the outlaw. A low, mocking laugh came from beneath his mask as he gloated over their mental tortures.

With a swift gesture the keen knife passed behind his head, and the mask fell to the floor, revealing a flushed, triumphant countenance, handsome as that of a fallen angel.

Ysabel Talfourd started, her black eyes dilating wildly as they stared at that face; then she shrunk back with a low cry of horror and unutterable loathing.

"Hail! had you recognize me, my dainty Ysabel?" he cried.

"Despilarro! thief—assassin—cowardly dog!" came huskily from her livid lips, though her eyes glowed vividly.

"Ay! my dainty lady," he grinned, menacingly, his knife once more at the heart of his helpless captive. "And more—your second husband—his executioner!"

CHAPTER X.

BLACK FACE AND BLACKER HEART.

PANTING, breathless from his terrible struggle against overwhelming odds, Randal Talfourd heard this brutal taunt, and vainly trying to wrest himself free from his bonds, from the sinewy hands that still gripped him tightly, he grated:

"You dastardly cur—to threaten a lady! Talk to me, not to her!"

Raymon Despilarro turned upon him, his black eyes glowing like living coals of fire, his thin lips drawn back until they revealed his white teeth, giving his swarthy face a peculiarly wolfish look as he snarled in reply:

"Ay! I will talk to you, dog of a Yankee! I have much to whisper in your long ears, and that right soon! And when I have spoken—when I have sung my little song to those who will gather 'round to hear it, then I will ask you whether or no you consider the old debt paid off, with interest!"

Ysabel Talfourd stared at the man whom she had believed long ago dead and turned to dust, loathing and fear mingling in her eyes and mobile features. But as she saw the perilous situation of her only child, and heard that malignant voice threatening her dearly-loved husband, she forgot her own danger and strove to rush between them. A strong hand held her back, but it could not silence her tongue.

"What you call wrongs were all my work, Raymon Despilarro, not his nor hers. I gloried in what I did then, and if I had it to do over again, my course would be just the same. Threaten me, if you must vent your spite and venom on anybody; not on those who are wholly innocent."

With a short, hard laugh, the chief glanced from face to face, then down upon the pale features of the senseless maiden, whose nerveless form lay across his arm.

Then for the first time the high-spirited mother trembled and her brave heart began to fail her, for she could not help but interpret that gloating, triumphant look aright.

The Spaniard laughed again, as he noted her sudden agitation, and more than ever did his handsome face resemble that which one assigns to the fallen angel.

"Your tongue speaks bold words, my dainty Ysabel, but your paling face and trembling fingers tell a very different tale. You are just beginning to realize the full extent of my power over you, one and all, soul and body—to know that on the simple rise or fall of my finger your fate depends!"

"I have been slow and sure. Years have passed since we met in a tourney for great and glorious stakes, where I met with utter defeat. You won, accursed Yankee! No doubt you and your magnificent bride often laughed to scorn the poor devil of a Spaniard whom you dragged in the dust, body and soul! It was your turn then; it is my turn now!"

"From that day—the same on which I vowed by all the saints in Heaven to have a deep and bitter vengeance on you both—I have patiently bided my time, doing my work as best I knew how, feeling assured that I would discover you before I found my grave. I had only that one end in life. I thought of nothing else. By day and by night it was ever busy in my brain."

"No matter now the different steps I took. Enough that I made sure of everything as I went along, and that I now hold your futures in the hollow of my hand, to save or destroy, as I deem proper. I have gathered all the proof against you that will be required, and now the great hour of my triumph is very close at hand. Already I can taste the sweet vengeance for which I have longed as a lost wretch in the midst of a blazing desert, thirsts for a drop of cold water!"

During this swift outpouring of taunts and threats, Randal Talfourd called his iron nerve back again, and knowing that escape unaided from his bonds was impossible, he tried to turn the worst passions of his bitter enemy from the heads of the dear ones upon himself.

"I recognize you now, Raymon Despilarro, though I believed the worms had long ago poisoned themselves on your carcass—worse luck for all honest people!"

The chief of the black-faces laughed grimly as he transferred the still unconscious maiden to the arms of one of his men, stooping to regain his mask which had fallen from his face at the touch of the keen blade.

"Your tongue is still free, Yankee hog. Make the most of it—but bear in mind that the first word or sound raised any higher than my present tones, will send a knife to the heart of your lovely daughter!"

"Better that than life in his power!" muttered Ysabel, with a gloomy, almost yearning glance into the face of her husband—a look that he rightly interpreted, and which turned his blood cold and drove it from his bronzed face.

Brave, strong hearted though he had proved himself in the dark and desperate days gone by, Randal Talfourd was not Roman enough to utter the death sentence of his idolized child, while there remained the faintest chance of saving her from dishonor. His wife could have done so, but she was a wife, and distrusted her

own judgment when it came in opposition to that of her husband. She could have uttered the fatal cry, but that look of horror in his eyes closed her lips.

Apparently Raymon Despilfarro failed to observe this bit of by-play, for he was busily engaged in replacing the black mask over his face and securing the severed strings.

This accomplished, he turned again toward Talfourd.

"Yes, I was patient, for I knew that in the end I must win my precious revenge, and I would not run the slightest risk of alarming my game prematurely. Oh, I was wonderfully patient!"

"At any time during the past two years, I could have struck a fatal blow at your heart, Yankee hog! I could have sent my thirsty knife home a thousand times, or scattered your brains over the gold you were piling up—for my benefit! But I held my hand and waited for something better."

"What do you mean?" mechanically muttered Talfourd.

"This: you were laying up riches for me; why destroy my faithful servant?"

"You covetous, crafty hound!"

"Ha! ha!" laughed the masked chief, sardonically. "That touches you, does it? Good! And yet I am holding still better in reserve. Gold was not your only treasure. You had others which I valued far above the yellow dross—above diamonds—above life itself! You wince—good, again!"

"You kept your secrets close locked in your own bosom, and made no man your confidant; but for all that I was not to be foiled. I had money, and I spent it like water. I sent out my tools in every direction, but it might all have been in vain, only for the one little slip which you yourself made. You sent a letter to this place, to be mailed, instead of carrying it yourself, and I read the direction on it!"

A low groan and curse commingled broke from the tight clinched teeth of the mine-owner. Despilfarro laughed again.

"Now you know why the poor devil never returned to claim the reward you promised him for faithfully performing your errand. He gave up his precious secret, but only when he had swallowed six inches of cold steel!"

"You murdered him, dog!" grated the mine-owner.

"No matter; he gave up his secret, and furnished a rare feast for the hungry wolves. I read the letter, and knew where you had hidden your dear ones. I hastened thither, and made sure there was no mistake. I saw the dainty Ysabel, a little older, perhaps, but still beautiful, still the vision of love at whose feet I bowed in adoration, years ago!"

"Had I only seen your hideous face!" muttered the Spanish woman, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"No doubt you would have flung yourself into my arms, just as you did scores and scores of times in the long ago—"

With an outraged cry, Ysabel wrested herself from the grasp which had grown careless, and sprang like a panther at the evil-tongued villain who so shamelessly calumniated her; but her hands held no weapon, and as he nimbly eluded her assault, Raymon Despilfarro caught her in his strong arms and held her powerless.

Like the stoop of a hawk, he bent his head and pressed his masked lips to hers, once and again, his black eyes leering through their holes at the rage-convulsed mine-owner, who once more strove to burst his bonds and to fling off his captors.

A cry of mad rage rose to the lips of the outraged woman, but was not suffered to pass their portals save in a stifled gasp, for the sinewy hand of the masked chief was clasped over her mouth, while with his head he made a quick signal to his men. It was promptly obeyed, and the stifling blanket was tightly wrapped around the head of Randal Talfourd.

"Choke the mad fool down until he is quiet!" he grated, savagely, holding his captive helpless. "Then pry open his jaws and gag him securely."

Thanks to the dense folds of the heavy blanket, this was not a difficult nor a long task for men so unscrupulous as those who served the will of the masked chief, and ten minutes later Randal Talfourd, gagged and utterly helpless, almost suffocated with impotent rage and fury as he watched the same process being used to silence his wife. Not only were her hands tied, but a painful gag was thrust between her teeth and then tied behind her head.

This accomplished, Raymon Despilfarro again resigned the woman to one of his gang, with his own hands binding a silk handkerchief over the lips of Lois, who was giving signs of returning consciousness. Then, holding the form of the maiden lightly against his breast, he faced the parents, who were now held erect by the ruffians, side by side.

"You know now that you have fallen helplessly into my hands, but do you comprehend the whole truth? Can you imagine that I am but really an humble instrument in the service of a great and terrible society? Ha! you start—your blood runs back to your quaking hearts!

You begin to realize—you suspect the truth—and it curdles the blood in your veins!"

Savagely, fiercely, he laughed, his eyes glowing through the black mask with a venomous light that seemed to scorch like living fire.

"You suspect, but you shall know! You, Randal Talfourd, and you, Ysabel Espinoza, are in the power of the Sons of the Fiery Cross!"

Despite their brave hearts, the faces of the captives turned paler, and their eyes filled with a chilling horror as the masked chief hissed these words, spitefully as a venomous reptile. Precarious as they knew their situation was from the first, they knew it was even more so now.

For a minute Raymon Despilfarro gloated over their helpless torture, then turned on his heel and uttered a low signal which was immediately answered by the opening of the chamber door by Luis Montero, his lieutenant, who had been sent in charge of the other division of the band, to secure Sleek Sam.

After the lieutenant came four stout men, tightly gripping the bound and hampered captive, eying him much as they might a lassoed grizzly.

Between his jaws was thrust a gag. Strong thongs were wound around his body and knotted about his wrists. But from the torn clothes, the rills of blood which trickled down his flushed face, it was evident that Sleek Sam had not been tamely captured.

"Good! Montero!" exclaimed Despilfarro, nodding his approval, as his officer mutely saluted. "Was any one hurt?"

"Some bruises; nothing more, captain. We took him by surprise, and he had no time to catch up a weapon, or it might have been different. He is strong as a bull, and don't know when he is whipped!"

"I know the rascal, and if I hadn't richer game on hand, he would furnish us fine sport. Never mind—his time will come, and then he shall pay for all. You hear, dog of a Yankee!" and the masked chief snapped his fingers in the face of the bound gambler.

A bold, fearless stare was all the reply Sleek Sam could make to this rude salutation; but there was death in his eyes.

"Look you, black-leg—cheating scoundrel!" grated Despilfarro, his voice full of malignant menace. "Either you or that old man killed one of my band this evening. When my present work is accomplished, I mean to sift that affair to the bottom. If you fired the fatal shot, I swear to hunt you out and drag you to a frightful death, even though you flee to the further ends of the earth to escape me! Blood for blood the oath has been recorded!"

"You will be left here," added Despilfarro, in a more subdued tone. "I will leave a trusty guard over the place until the dawning of day. If you attempt to free yourself, or to in any manner raise an alarm, my men will slit your throat as surely as the stars are shining in the heavens!"

Turning away, he picked up the pistol which Randal Talfourd flung away when it failed him in the time of bitter need, and with a mocking laugh, he held it up before the eyes of the mine-owner and slowly extracted—not cartridges, but empty shells!

"You are a poor fool and a worse soldier, after all, Yankee hog!" he laughed, sneeringly. "You should have inspected your weapons after your little adventure. It was to effect this, not to slay or rob you, that we attacked you this evening. We were not ready to kill you just yet, and to make sure—you can see for yourself how finely we worked the oracle!"

He reloaded the weapons and put them in his own belt.

CHAPTER XI.

A FIEND IN HUMAN SHAPE.

RANDAL TALFOURD stared at the empty shells as they dropped from the cylinders of his pistols to the floor, hardly able to trust the evidence of his own eyesight. The mocking speech of the masked chief was highly improbable, and yet—there lay the empty shells in place of the fresh cartridges which he had placed in the weapons on leaving Dixie. Until he reached the house of Diego Zarate, his belt had never left his person, and even then it lay before his eyes, where no hand could touch it without his knowledge.

A cold thrill crept over his stout frame, as he was forced to believe that Raymon Despilfarro spoke the plain truth. Such far-seeing cunning bade ill for his escape from the coils cast around him and his.

"You can see now, my dear friends, why it was that a round dozen of good men and true, suffered you to slip through their fingers, without cutting a purse or a throat. Their orders were simply to spike your guns, and when that was accomplished safely, they were ready to break away, even had no one come to the rescue. But had they known the truth—could they have seen how fatal one of those wild shots was fated to prove—before the mob came from this place at the alarm, neither one of you would have lived to see this moment!"

"Better make sure of this slippery devil while

we have him in our hands," muttered a squat ruffian, in surly tones.

The masked chief flashed a swift glance toward Sleek Sam, whose hard-set features showed only a grim defiance and contempt, and for a brief space he visibly hesitated. But then he flung out one hand with a short, hard laugh.

"We may spoil all by trying to do too much. No; let the card-sharp run his length for awhile. Our arm is long, and can rake him in again easily enough when we wish. Besides, Tomaso is not with us, and he must be one to witness the doom of his brother's destroyer. It would be too dangerous to try to hold a slippery devil like this—no, not yet!"

Despilfarro seemed to be arguing with himself, quite as much as for the satisfaction of his men. The temptation was a powerful one, but he dared not yield to it just then, while other interests of so much more importance were at stake.

At a sign from him, the black-faces pushed Sleek Sam across the room, to the side of the bed, tumbling him upon it without ceremony. Despilfarro glided after, saying sharply:

"You have a short respite, Sleek Sam, as you call yourself. We are going now, but I leave a guard behind, with strict orders to slit your throat from ear to ear, if you utter a sound above a whisper, or try in any way to free yourself before the rising of the sun. You understand?"

Only those glittering, defiant eyes answered, and reckless though he had proven himself, the masked chief visibly shrunk before the deadly hatred expressed therein.

Turning abruptly away, Despilfarro bade his men lift the prisoners and follow after.

It was no slight task to carry the heavy form of the mine-owner down the narrow stairs in silence, and when the hall was reached, the masked chief paused, addressing Talfourd:

"Listen, hog of a Yankee! It is a shame to burden honest gentlemen with the lumbering carcass of a swinish Gringo. You must carry yourself. But before I set your legs at liberty, listen: all the trouble you give us, will be visited upon your wife and daughter, one or both. If you wish them well, you will proceed quietly in the direction ordered."

The thongs which had until now confined the ankles of the mine-owner were severed, and he was raised to an erect position, two stout black-faces grasping him by the arms, while others held themselves in readiness to leap upon him at the first sign of rebellion.

Both of the women had their hands tied before them, but their lower limbs were left free, and they required no urgings to walk, knowing that they would be carried in evil arms, else.

Sending a couple of scouts ahead, to make sure the coast was clear, Raymon Despilfarro, with his hand grasping the arm of Ysabel Talfourd, led the way out of the dilapidated house.

Pursuing much the same course as while creeping upon their unsuspecting victims, the black-faces stole away through the night, hugging the deeper shadows, with scouts in advance and on either hand, to make sure of the ground before those in immediate charge of the captives ventured upon it.

On until the sleeping town was lost to view. On past the spot where the white boulder lay guarding the little pool of blood which had flowed from the veins of the first one to fall in consequence of that terrible death-vow. And as they passed it by, Randal Talfourd felt the griptighten on his person, and heard the breathing of his captors coming deeper and hotter. It was not difficult to divine the cause. He recognized the scene, and knew they were thinking of their fallen comrade.

A few hundred yards further up the road, the masked chief turned into a narrow path to the left, following this for a short distance, coming to a halt at a scattering grove of trees, among the shadows of which the prisoners could distinguish the shapes of horses.

"Toss the Yankee porker into a saddle, and bind his feet together beneath the animal's belly," muttered Despilfarro, as he resigned his fair captive to one of his men for the moment.

Knowing that any attempt at resistance would surely result in the abuse of his helpless dear ones, Randal Talfourd quietly submitted to the inevitable, and was lifted into a saddle by his captors. Stout thongs were knotted around his ankles, rendering it impossible for him to fall or cast himself off of the animal, while a lasso was passed around his waist and secured to the saddle, pommel and cantle. Then one of the black-faces mounted behind him, grasping the reins on either side of the prisoner.

Raymon Despilfarro personally inspected this arrangement before he mounted his own steed, then motioned the man in temporary charge of Ysabel to pass her back to his arms.

It was worse than death for her to feel his hated arms encircling her form, to feel the warmth of his body as he held her firmly before him; but she, like Talfourd, thought of poor Lois, and dared not struggle to escape.

In a like manner Luis Montero supported the maiden, and then, at their chief's signal, the

band of kidnappers rode away from the little grove, as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

The blood leaped madly in the veins of the triumphant villain as he rode along at the head of the cavalcade, and unable to wholly restrain his evil passions, he muttered bitter taunts and stinging words into the ear of his captive.

Again he recalled the past, when she treated him so scornfully; when, even as the cup of triumph touched his eager lips, she dashed it away and covered him with shame and mortification, fleeing from the very altar in the arms of her lover.

But as his fluent tongue touched upon the present then his cruel words sunk deepest and gave the most pain.

"Then I would have been content with you alone, my proud and haughty Ysabel, but now—now I have two delicious slaves! Through you and that cursed Yankee dog, I have lost all these years—half a lifetime! In hunting for you, I have had no time to think of love and marriage. I am growing old, and my head is beginning to show the touch of frost. I must crowd two years of life and love into each one, to get square with fate. And so I will! I will send your husband to glory, and marry his widow—ay! and his charming daughter as well! My manly bosom is broad enough to support both—"

His tones and looks were even more foul than his words, and with utter desperation boiling in her tortured heart, the Spanish woman caught at the haft of his knife as it touched her bound hands, and tore it from its sheath with an inarticulate cry of suffocating hatred and woe.

The masked chief felt the movement, and divined his peril as by instinct. Dropping the reins, he strove to arrest her stroke, swaying swiftly to one side in the saddle as he caught sight of the flashing steel. He only partially succeeded, and a fierce curse burst from his lips as he felt the keen blade entering his flesh—then both woman and man fell to the ground beneath the horse's hoofs.

A scene of wild excitement ensued, some of the black-faces leaping to the ground and rushing to the assistance of their fallen chief; but this was not needed. With a savage snarl, Despilfarro caught and wrested the weapon from the tied hands of the woman, leaping to his feet, blood streaming from his side, where the keen blade had slit open his garments, laying bare an ugly-looking gash where the weapon had glanced from the bones, instead of entering between them.

"Curse the tiger-cat!" he grated, as he satisfied himself that the wound was only superficial, though it was causing him no slight degree of pain. "Look to her, Stefano. If she tries another trick like that, choke her until she grows quiet!"

Standing in the moonlight, Despilfarro yielded himself to the care of a couple of his men, whose nimble and practiced fingers quickly brought the gaping lips of the wound together and bandaged it neatly. Then the chief climbed carefully into his saddle, and the party once more rode on.

For an hour and more, their progress was unobstructed, but at the termination of that period, the masked chief drew rein and addressed his lieutenant:

"We separate here, Luis. You and Stefano will take charge of the girl. You know where to go. Lose no time by the way. Wait there until I come. Guard her carefully, but treat her as you would a queen. If she escapes—better cut your own throats before your carelessness is discovered. Go!"

Without a word the lieutenant, who bore Lois Talfourd in his arms, and the burly ruffian who had been selected to accompany him, turned sharply to the right and rode away.

"You, Pueblo Dave," continued the chief, speaking rapidly; "will take charge of half the band, and bear to the left. In your especial charge I place the woman. See that you bring her safely to the rendezvous. Off with you!"

The band divided, Raymon Despilfarro placing himself at the head of the squad which escorted the almost distracted mine-owner, and once more the journey was resumed.

On as rapidly as possible, through that broken, rocky tract the black-faces dashed, almost imperceptibly swinging around to the left, not once drawing rein until a narrow river was reached. Here and there its course was broken by rapids, deep holes lying between the banks here coming close together, to widen again to thrice the distance a little further on.

Reining in, Despilfarro dismounted, resigning his horse to the care of one of his men, then standing by while Randal Talfourd was lowered from the saddle.

Scarcely were the animals led aside and tethered in a clump of trees, when the second division of the band made its appearance, and a moment later Ysabel Talfourd was lying on the short grass beside her helpless husband.

"Put away your horses and get down to business," said Despilfarro, turning toward the captives. "You understand what to do, and there is little time to waste."

Instantly the black-faces set to work, Despil-

farro standing beside the prisoners, his arms folded across his breast, his eyes gleaming vividly through the mask as he watched the busy preparations of his satellites.

Some busied themselves in gathering dry fuel and kindling a fire on a little point of land which extended over the water, there running deep and silent. Others were still more curiously employed, crouching over a couple of stout pieces of wood which they dragged out from beneath a clump of vine-clad bushes amid a slight clinking as though of chains.

As this sound met the ears of the pale, haggard-eyed woman, she involuntarily lifted her head to glance in that direction. Despilfarro caught the movement, and a mocking, fiendish laugh hissed through his teeth, as he said:

"Hail you recognize the sound, my precious? And yet—you surely never was a witness to one of the displays?"

Ysabel Talfourd suffered her head to fall back closing her eyes to shut out the sight of that hated form.

Despilfarro motioned to a couple of his men and bade them drag the prisoners to where their backs might find support against an abrupt rise in the ground. He removed his mask and thrust it into his pocket, knowing that the sight of his face would be anything but soothing to his captives. And squatting close beside them, he called their attention to the work being performed by the black-faces.

"It has progressed far enough for you to give a tolerably close guess at its meaning," he said, with a harsh laugh.

Though they struggled not to, neither Talfourd nor his wife could long resist the temptation to look at the object on which the band was laboring. And their eyes grew wilder as they saw—a large, wooden cross!

Again that fiendish laugh from the gloating demon who watched them so closely, and then came his voice in words:

"Ay! a cross, my dear friends! Can you guess the use for which we intend it? Bah! I forgot that your tongues are silent—but no matter; I will explain."

"On that cross will be bound the form of a member of our order who has broken his sacred vows. There is no alternative. It is a religious duty which not the boldest among us dare shirk or try to evade, even though a brother was the sinner!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

HELPLESS in the grasp of a strong man, unable to either cry out or to fight against a separation that crushed the last faint hope in her bosom, Lois Talfourd lay against the breast of Luis Montero, the lieutenant of the Sons of the Fiery Cross, moaning faintly, more dead than alive.

She knew not what terrible fate was in store for her, as she had been unconscious through nearly all of the time when Raymon Despilfarro partly betrayed his satanic plans to his helpless captives; but she knew that she was being carried away from her parents into the heart of the wilderness, by those whose hearts were doubtless as black as the masks which covered their faces from sight.

The blow lost none of its force, coming as it did so soon after that stolen meeting with her true love. Then, barring a little cloud of uncertainty, which really served to lighten the romance of love, all was rose-colored. Now—death itself seemed far preferable to the future which fate held in store.

Luis Montero and the black face who had been detailed to bear him company, seemed thoroughly acquainted with the course they had to follow in order to reach their destination by the quickest route, for not once did they halt by the way or slacken their speed save when the nature of the ground rendered it necessary for them to proceed at a moderate pace, and permit their good animals to pick and choose their own way.

In silence the Sons rode along, for there was little love lost between them, despite the fact of their being oath-bound. Probably this was the reason Raymon Despilfarro detailed the burly Stefano to attend his good-looking lieutenant, rightly considering that neither of the men would dare prove negligent or slight his duty, while the other would be only too glad of a chance to report the short-comings of his rival.

Without a voluntary motion of her own, Lois Talfourd lay in the arms of Luis Montero during all that long night-ride, her spirit too thoroughly broken to make any vain attempt at escape. She hardly knew where she was. It all seemed like some frightful dream from which she would surely awake in the course of a few minutes, to laugh merrily over her imaginary sufferings with her dear ones.

Steadily on pressed the night-riders, until the gray dawn was not far away, then they entered a winding valley which lay between two ridges of broken, craggy ground, too small for mountains, too high for hills. A mile along this valley, then the black-faces drew rein beside a little patch of timber, and for the first time Luis Montero gave up his fair burden; but even then it was only while he could dismount

from his sweating horse and stretch his cramped arms a little.

"Look after the cattle, Stefano; then you can come up to the cabin for further orders," he said, shortly, as he again took the form of the maiden in his arms.

Stefano uttered an inarticulate growl in reply, casting an ugly glance toward the tall form of his superior, as the lieutenant turned on his heel and strode away.

"Ay! you dung-hill cock in fine feathers!" he muttered, beneath his breath, as he shook a clinched fist stealthily at the retreating figure. "You talk with a wide mouth now, though before you climbed up on your high horse of office, you could pick and choose your words with the most bumble! Then it was *pray* and *please* and *will you*, good Stefano! Now—a dog would snap back at the high-and-mighty tone you use! Then you were afraid that old Stefano would fill the office you now try to occupy—and so he would, but for your devilish lies and black-hearted treachery, you upstart! But I'll get even—be sure of that! And when I do—"

No need to finish the sentence in audible speech, while the surly Mexican was thoroughly master of such expressive pantomime. A crouching leap as though bounding upon a hated enemy from ambush; a motion as though of clutching him by the throat with one hand, while the other swept a gleaming blade viciously through the air.

Woe be unto Luis Montero should old Stefano ever have the good luck to catch him napping!

Unconscious of all this, though he knew well enough that the man whom he had defeated for office, had never forgiven nor forgotten the manner in which that defeat was brought about, Luis Montero bore his fair burden along through the night, turning from the middle of the valley toward the northern line of hills. There, hidden in the shadows cast by the scraggy trees which overhung it, nestling close against the steep ground, was a small cabin constructed of unpeeled logs.

The door swung open at the touch of the man's hand, and without hesitation he entered. The interior was so dark that eyesight was of no avail, but Montero moved about with the freedom which could only come of thorough familiarity with his surroundings.

Stopping near the rear wall of the cabin, he placed the form of his prisoner on a low couch of leaves and dry grass, then rose erect and crossing to the opposite corner, produced a small lantern from beneath a heap of rubbish. Striking a match, he ignited the lantern, then turned to Lois.

She was lying where he placed her, a frightened, half-wild look in her dark eyes as they followed his every motion. It was easy to see that she had not yet recovered from the shock of her rude capture.

Montero hung the lantern to a string which depended from the smoky rafters, near the center of the one small room, then stood with folded arms, gazing steadily through the hulk in his saddle mark at the pale face of his prisoner.

Thus he stood until the heavy footsteps of old Stefano broke the spell, and turning oddly as the Mexican entered the cabin, he bade him kindle a small fire in the fireplace.

In sulky silence Stefano obeyed, then, without waiting to ask if his superior had any further orders for him, he turned and left the hut. Montero looked after him in silence, shrugging his shoulders as the sulky rascal vanished, but making no offer to detain him. Instead, he closed the door, then removed his mask, revealing a clear-cut, handsome countenance, with black eyes, curling hair and jetty mustaches.

It was not an evil-looking face, and a faint hope sprung up in the heart of the helpless maiden as she gazed upon him. Yet she shrunk away from his touch as he approached and bent over her, with gentle fingers removing the bandage from over her lips.

He could not avoid noticing this involuntary movement of repulsion, but his voice was smooth and soft as he spoke:

"You have nothing to fear from me, Miss Talfourd. I will prove myself a true friend, if you will only permit me."

Hope sprung up in the breast of the maiden, and her pale cheeks slightly flushed and an eager light filled her eyes.

"Oh, if you are a man, take me back—take me to my dear father and my poor mother! I will bless you forever!"

"That would be anything rather than the act of a friend, my dear Miss Talfourd," replied Montero, with a short laugh that rung unpleasantly in her ears. "Think in whose power they were when we parted from them! Better you fall into the jaws of a hungry lion than to lie at the mercy of Raymon Despilfarro while his evil blood is boiling hot, as now!"

"I care not—so I share their fate!" passionately cried Lois, suddenly regaining some of her wonted spirit, as she rose to a sitting posture. "Take me to them, and I will bless you!"

Slowly the man shook his head, his face growing graver.

"It cannot be. You would have cause to curse, rather than bless me. If you have no

other hope than in your parents, you had much better lie a captive here until the end."

For a brief space Lois was silent, her hands clasped, her head bowed, the picture of utter despair and misery. But then her head was lifted, and a bright light filled her eyes.

"Then take me back to New Babylon! I have a good friend there who will join me in blessing you—who will make you rich enough to leave this evil life forever! And I, too, will pour gold into your hands until you cry hold! If only you will set me free—take me back to town! You will!"

She could scarcely speak articulately, but it was not difficult to follow her meaning; but Luis Montero shook his head, with a short, hard, unpleasant laugh as he made reply:

"I am no miser, and all the gold in the world would not tempt me to play my master false. You must think of some other reward, my dear lady. I would risk far more for your simple thanks than I would for untold riches."

"You shall have them," faltered Lois, shrinking away from that burning gaze, her cheeks paling again, the heart sinking heavily in her bosom, she could scarce have told why.

"And those of your dear friend whom you are so anxious to rejoin, I doubt not?" softly uttered the man, a peculiar light in his eyes as he stood gazing into her face. "A relative, may I ask?"

The swift flush which crossed the pale cheeks was answer sufficient, and without waiting for a plainer one, Montero came a little closer, speaking rapidly:

"Not a relative, but one who hopes to become such as the days go on—I comprehend! A gallant lover, young, tall, handsome—the *beau ideal* of manly grace and nobility! And his name—shall I speak it? Willard Yorke—*curse him!*"

Piercely burst forth the imprecation, and the black eyes of the man resembled living sparks of fire as he added:

"You see, I know him. I know that you two are lovers, that the fellow followed you here, unknown to your mother. I know that you met him in secret this very night. I was near enough to see and hear. And I would have driven my good knife deep into his heart as you lay so lovingly in his arms, had I not known of a still more bitter way of punishing him! I knew that the spoiler was close at hand, and I could afford to wait a few hours longer for my delicious revenge. I did wait, and now I am about to reap my reward, in one shape if not another."

"You saw and heard the man who led us? You may have heard your parents speak of Raymon Despilfarro, an old lover of your mother's, in the days before you were born. If so, you can guess how little mercy he will show those whom he has hated so bitterly for so many years. If not, I can tell you at least a portion of his plans."

"He means to punish your father, who once belonged to our secret order, but forfeited his membership and his right to life when he broke all his sacred vows."

"He means to make your mother his slave. He also thinks to serve you after the same fashion; and so he will, unless I determine to foil him in this respect. I can do it—for a proper consideration. It must be a very rich one, to pay me for the terrible risks I run in proving false to a brother and a master, both in one. The penalty for such treachery is death in its most frightful form—death on the burning cross! Yet I am willing to run this risk if I can make sure of reaping the delicious reward I covet more than aught else this wide world can bestow upon mortal man!"

He paused seemingly from lack of breath, his face flushed hotly, his eyes glowing, his veins swelling on his temples.

Gazing at him like a helpless bird whom the cunning serpent is charming, Lois lay, unable to utter a word in reply.

Luis Montero saw her terror, and with a powerful effort placed his wild passions under partial control, speaking more calmly, but still direct and to the point:

"Listen to me, Miss Talfourd. It is not the sudden passion of a single night that I am revealing to you. We met long ago and under very different circumstances. Then the odds were all against me. We were in a large city, where a single cry from your lips would suffice to bring a score of men to your aid. I was a stranger, and worse—drunk! You see I am frank; I do not spare myself at the expense of truth."

"I was in Denver on business, dispatched thither by none other than Raymon Despilfarro, in quest of—your mother! It is gospel truth. I was only one of a score of spies, who were engaged in the quest for his long-lost lady-love!"

"At the time, I did not know who or what you were. I had often seen you, but none of those whom I dare ask could tell me your name. Then came that unlucky evening. I spoke to you, but you took alarm and would have fled. I caught you, to explain—I meant nothing worse then—and your lover came, striking me down from behind. You see, I was drunk, and hardly in condition to defend myself. But let it pass. Enough that I waited and watched and learned

all I needed. My disguise was perfect, and I do not wonder that you can hardly believe me the old man you saw that evening!"

"To come to the point," he added, after a brief pause. "I can save you from Raymon Despilfarro, but I will not do so in order to place you in the arms of another man than myself. I give you your choice: Despilfarro for an enforced lover, or Luis Montero, a free-born American, for a lawful husband. If you swear to marry me within the year, I will kill that surly hound outside, carry you back to your friends, and do all I am able to rescue your parents alive—if not, to avenge them."

"Refuse, and I will keep you here until Raymon Despilfarro comes to claim his prize—then man nor devil can aid you against that master-fiend!"

"Come, Miss Talfourd, I have said enough. Make your choice—Despilfarro and shame, or Montero and an honest marriage!" he rapidly uttered, his black eyes all aglow with excitement.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LOVER IN CHASE.

"ROUST up, young'un! Thar's the little Ole Boy to pay, an' not a durned red cent in the treasury!"

Sharply Hector Ajax Rivers hissed these words into the ear of Willard Yorke, shaking him violently by the arm, most effectually driving slumber from his eyes and brain.

"What now?" he demanded, leaping to his feet and staring hurriedly about them, his hands mechanically seeking the butts of his trusty revolvers.

His first and most natural thoughts were of the howling mob of New Babylonians under lead of Sleek Sam, whom they had given the slip in the shadows of night. He expected to see them creeping stealthily or rushing boldly upon them, and it was highly creditable to his pluck that he showed not the faintest trace of flinching from the struggle.

"Tain't comin' that-a-way," hurriedly uttered Hector, reading the action aright, and tightening his nervous grip on the arm of his young friend. "The imps ain't after us—wuss luck, ef I be a pesky coward! Tain't man-meat they're ropin' in now, but the pettycut-w'ar-ers!"

"Who—where—what do you mean?" excitedly demanded Yorke, confused and somewhat bewildered.

"No time fer talk now!" was the hurried response, as the old tramp bent his head in seeming listening. "They'll git clean out o' sight an' hearin' ef we putter 'long here. Ef you want to do the best act o' your hull corporosity, jest rub out your eyes, brush up your wits, laryit your talker an' foller the ole man—that's business!"

Without waiting for an answer, Hector Ajax turned and glided swiftly, silently away from the spot. Without another word, feeling full confidence in the honesty and integrity of his newly-made friend, Willard Yorke followed his lead, content to await a more promising moment for full explanations.

Crouching, running with his head close to the ground, like a fox-hound on a cold scent, the old ragamuffin led the way at a rapid pace through the shadows and over the intersecting strips of moonlight, quickly striking the road that led from New Babylon away from the railway, but not entering it. Instead, the veteran dodged swiftly along through the shadows to one side, his footfalls as light and noiseless as those of a hungry, food-hunting panther.

Still marveling, Willard Yorke kept him company with equal speed and silence, a haunting fear of impending evil making his heart throb rapidly, oppressively. And yet, it could hardly be possible that any one dear to him was concerned in this strange night adventure!

On past the body of the horse which had been crippled by the rope-trap of the cunning black-faces, to finally be put out of its misery by the keen blade and steady hand of Sleek Sam; past the white boulder which marked the spot where died the criminal whose fall had already nearly proven fatal to the ragged tramp; still on, until the clattering of iron-shod hoofs at a distance suddenly brought the hound-like tracker to an abrupt pause.

Only for a moment; barely long enough to enable his keen ear to note the direction and the probable distance of the tell-tale sounds.

"Buckle down to it, lad!" grated the veteran, slackening his speed barely enough to permit Yorke to reach his side for a brief space. "Ef we let 'em git out o' sound an' sight now, our cake's all dough an' no good fer nothin'!"

"What and who are we chasing?" asked Willard, his voice as yet showing no traces of fatigue or shortness of wind.

"Pettycut-bookers o' the meanest sort, I reckon!" was the evasive reply. "Wait ontel we get within range o' the pesky imps, an' then I'll tell ye all about it."

A spurt of speed carried Hector ahead of the young ranchero, and thus they raced for a few minutes, making comparatively little noise, for they were passing along a tolerably well defined

trail. And then, with a low grunt of relief, the old man suffered Yorke to forge alongside, for not many rods ahead they could just distinguish the dim, phantom-like shapes of a number of horsemen trotting rapidly along.

"Thar they be, lad!" muttered the veteran in short, jerking speech. "Them's our mutton. As you love the good Lawd an' hate the devil, you want to keep ontel thar track ontel the time comes when we kin jist everlastin'ly lam-baste 'em!"

"Who are they? What have they done? Why are we chasing them?" persisted the young ranchero.

Still the veteran hesitated to reveal all that he had discovered before that wild chase began. Almost imperceptibly he slackened his pace until the horsemen drew further away, getting more and more indistinct, even while riding in the moonlight. Then, little by little, he told Yorke all.

When Sleek Sam shot out the lights in the "Cuboose," and Hector Ajax so abruptly started to "git out o' the wilderness," in company with his young friend, the two latter, after baffling the pursuit of the citizens in the night, concluded it would be healthier sleeping out in the valley than returning to town. When satisfied that the half-drunken crowd had given over the useless search, they sought out a retired spot and lay down to pass the remainder of the night.

But the ragamuffin was not able to compose himself to sleep, after the peculiar events of that night, and it was while he was prowling around, owl-like, that he heard and watched the return of the black-faces from their successful raid.

He recognized the captives, and realizing their great peril, at once stole away to arouse Willard Yorke. He gave but a fleeting thought to hastening to town with the alarm. He knew that to do so would be a fatal loss of time, even should the citizens listen to his story instead of fitting a rope-tie around his windpipe. Before they could arm and mount, the gang of kidnappers would be far out of sight and hearing. It would be necessary for them to wait until the rising sun gave light enough for them to pick up the trail. Meantime, what might not be the fate of the captives?

Such was the explanation given Willard Yorke by his old companion, and though he strove his best to break the force of his revelation as much as possible, it fell with terrible force upon the young lover. A hoarse, mad cry escaped his lips as he at length realized the frightful truth, and he would have rushed headlong after the kidnappers of his loved one, thus insuring his own destruction without in the least bettering her situation, only for the ready hand of old Hector.

"Don't you be a durned fool, boy!" he muttered, almost savagely, as he caught him by the arm. "Let them pizen imps disskiver we're on thar track, an' it's good-by Sarah Jane! They'd wipe us out, an' then who'd help the pettycuts an' the ole man out o' thar nasty hobble? Jest nobody, fer you 'n' me is the only other ones as knows a durn word about it—see?"

In this vein did the veteran argue with the half-crazed lover, finally succeeding in making him realize how fatal his rash impetuosity would prove, unless tightly curbed. With prudence and skill to aid them, they might succeed; without those qualities, they would surely fail, and lose their own lives without at all benefiting the captives.

The victory was hardly gained, and the trailers pressing on at top speed to make up for the ground they had lost during the argument, if such it may be called, when Hector did almost all of the talking, when they discovered the band of kidnappers at a halt ahead of them. It was where Ysabel Talfourd, wrought to desperation by the fiendish taunts of her captor, tried to silence his foul tongue with his own knife.

Creeping closer, Hector grasping Willard Yorke by the arm with a force that constantly kept his recent pledge in mind, the trailers gained a much needed breathing spell while the wound of the masked chief was being dressed. They had an opportunity, too, to carefully count the number of their enemies, and even the hot-blooded young ranchero could not help admitting the worse than folly of any attempt at rescuing the captives by open force.

On once more the black-faces rode, and after them raced the two brave men, hoping against hope for a chance to rescue the prisoners. On through the night, without check or halt for fully another hour, then Raymon Despilfarro drew rein and ordered the separation of the band into three parts.

The two pursuers had been left far behind during that long stretch, despite their almost superhuman efforts to keep within reach of the kidnappers, and they were still at a goodly distance when they caught a glimpse of the division.

A moment of painful doubt—then, as the truth became clear, a mad, gasping cry escaped the lips of the lover, and drawing a revolver, he seemed about to open fire on the enemy.

"Quit, durn ye!" grated Hector, wresting the weapon from the almost insane young man.

"Would ye ruin everything? Would you shoot down the girl you pretend to love? Don't you see your chance? That light dress is worn by Lois Talfourd, and there are only two men guarding her. Follow them—watch your chance, and you can set her free. I'll follow the mother. Good-by, and God give you all the success you deserve!"

No longer the rough, uncouth drawl; a clear voice, speaking with fluent earnestness; but in his present state, Willard Yorke did not notice the change.

"Remember!" added the old man, as they parted. "Her life and honor depend on you. Be prudent, or you ruin all."

Without a word of reply the young ranchero dashed away in chase of the two men who guarded his loved one; but for all that, the last solemn warning was ringing in his ears, like a prophecy from some superior spirit.

It seemed to cool his madly-boiling blood, and for the first time since that long and killing chase began, he could glance ahead and make some calculations for the future.

He saw his chance now, but he did not risk wasting it forever by any rash action. He raced along in the rear of the two horsemen, keeping at a safe distance in their rear, knowing that they must come to a halt sooner or later, when his time for stern and steady work would come.

Yet even his trained muscles were severely tasked before the rendezvous beneath the foothills was gained, and when the black-faces dismounted, and Luis Montero carried his fair captive to the little hut, his breathing was so violent, his nerves so unstrung, that Willard Yorke dared not attempt a very near approach for some minutes.

Lying under cover, he saw old Stefano come out of the cabin, after kindling the fire, and take up his quarters near the horses. And then, crawling along as silently as a serpent, the lover drew nearer the cabin.

The dense shade favored him, and he paused close to the end of the cabin, listening intently. He could distinguish the voice of a man, speaking swiftly, earnestly, but could not make out the words with sufficient distinctness to fully comprehend the subject which was being discussed.

Silently he passed around to the rear of the cabin, and his breath came in quick gasps as he caught sight of a tiny ray of light which sifted through a crevice between two of the rudely-fitted logs. And a moment later he was gazing in upon Lois Talfourd and the renegade American.

"Take your choice—shame with Despilfarro, or a wedded life with me!" the black-face was saying, and swift came the answer from the lips of the maiden, whose just indignation was rapidly getting the better of her fears.

"Death would be preferable to either!" she cried, bitterly.

"Doubtless, were you given a third alternative," was the sneering retort. "But you are not. It is mating with either one or the other. Once more—will you promise what I ask, taking a solemn oath to fulfill your pledge if I take you back to New Babylon and let you go free! In one word!"

"Never!" came the reply, in firm, resolute tones.

"Then foul means shall win me the prize, since fair ones fail me," snarled the ruffian, turning on his heel and calling sharply: "Stefano! come hither—haste!"

With teeth tightly clinched and every nerve steeled for instant action, Willard Yorke drew his revolver, still peering through the crack in the wall. Nor was he kept long in suspense, for a minute later the door opened and the surly Mexican crossed the threshold, growling out to his officer:

"Stefano is here. What do you want with him?"

"To put him off duty forever!" cried the treacherous wretch, swiftly stretching out his right hand.

A heavy report—a bright flash—then, without a word or groan, luckless Stefano fell backward, a round hole in his forehead, where the unerring bullet had pierced his brain!

A startled cry from the lips of the horrified girl, made the assassin turn quickly toward her, showing his white teeth.

"He will never appear as witness against me! From this action you can see how determined I am to win the prize I have coveted so long. Now, who can save you from my arms?"

"I can, you murderous cur!" thundered a clear voice, as the door swung open and Willard Yorke leaped into the room.

A joyous cry from Lois—a hissing curse from Montero—a swift wheeling with cocking pistol—but just an instant too late to either save or avenge himself!

A spout of blinding flame almost struck him in the face, and—strange retribution!—Luis Montrose reeled and fell backward, a bullet-hole in the center of his forehead, the precise counterpart of the death-wound he had given Stefano!

And then, with glad cries and sobs of heart-felt joy, the lovers met and were clasped in a fond embrace.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SONS OF THE FIERY CROSS.

SLOWLY and in measured tones Raymon Despilfarro spoke, pronouncing each word with a pitiless deliberation and distinctness, as though he was determined not to leave a ray of hope through any misunderstanding on the part of his helpless captives.

The red light of the fire fell fairly upon their faces, and eagerly, hungrily the villain watched to note the effect of his speech. Though it was not wholly without effect, still the result was not exactly what he would have it, nor what he so confidently counted on producing.

In the sternly handsome face of the ex-soldier, he could read an abundance of scorn and hatred, but precious little fear. Though so helplessly in his power, Randal Talfourd evidently would give him but scant pleasure through hearing him beg for mercy.

But there was a shadow as of some soul-sickening horror imprinted upon the pale face of Ysabel Talfourd, and the chief of the black-faces laughed in devilish glee as he noted this.

"Aha! my lady-bird! You begin to feel the sting at last, do you?" he laughed, his voice, his face, his smile all besetting a demon of evil, rather than a man of flesh and blood. "Good! it is the first taste of vengeance I have had since you and that accursed Yankee hog played me for an ass—and won!"

For a single instant a grim smile curled the lip of the stalwart mine-owner as he recalled the past, thus brought forward by the venomous Spaniard. Despilfarro caught the fleeting expression, and with a savage snarl, he lifted one foot and tapped the captive's lips with the dirty sole.

"That for you, hog of a Yankee! I wipe my dirty shoes on your lips! You laugh now, as you did then; but for how long! You see—the light is growing clearer in the east. When the sun comes up high enough to cast its first rays on this spot, your body will be ashes and your soul in perdition!"

"Not that, Raymon Despilfarro!" cried the agonized eyes, rather than the tongue of the captive woman.

No plain was the speech to the keen senses of the chief that, longing to drink his cup of vengeance to its very dregs, he flashed forth his knife and cut the cords which held the cunning gags in place.

Ysabel tried to speak the moment her tongue was at liberty, but only a hoarse, inarticulate sound responded. The tension had been too severe and long maintained for her to regain immediate control of her organs of speech.

Despilfarro stooped and held a flask of liquor to her parched lips, sneering as the woman accepted his offer.

"Your proud spirit is surely giving way, my angel!" he cried, mockingly. "The woman I once knew would rather have suffered all the pangs of Tartarus itself than accept a favor from my hands. It is better so. I will have an easier time breaking you in to my wishes than I dared hope!"

"Not for myself did I take the draught, Raymon Despilfarro," muttered the Spanish woman, her tones barely articulate at first, but rapidly growing stronger and under better control as the strong liquor loosened the stiffened muscles. "I would die a thousand deaths in preference—but to warn you against the cruel mistake you are making. He is innocent. If you were wronged in the days gone by—"

"If, say you?" savagely broke in the chief, his eyes all aglow, his thin lips tinged with a white froth. "When you promised to become my bride—when you even stood with me before the altar, and listened to the words of the holy padre—if, you say! It was enough to change an angel of light into the very devil himself!"

"No more, Ysabel," hoarsely uttered Randal Talfourd. "You can change nothing by appealing to the demon, and your pleadings will only increase his devilish triumph. Be silent, for my sake."

Again the dastard wretch struck the mine-owner across the lips with his foot, snarling like a wild beast. The big veins swelled upon Talfourd's temples until it seemed as though they must burst, but not a sound escaped his lips, not a movement did he suffer himself to make. He had already so thoroughly tested the strength of his bonds, that he knew escape through bursting them was impossible. His sole purpose now was to render the triumph of his old rival as hollow as possible.

As though afraid to trust himself longer within arm's-length of his prisoners, Raymon Despilfarro turned abruptly away to where his black-faces were busily engaged in preparing the massive wooden cross. It was a difficult struggle, but in the course of a few minutes, he regained partial control of his mad passions, and once more turned toward his two prisoners.

He threw himself down on the grass beside Ysabel, staring moodily at the black-faces as they worked, his voice low and deep-toned as he began talking, half to himself, as it seemed:

"The devil seems to be in me, to-night! I cannot keep my tongue or my thoughts away from those days, years ago! I must recall some

of those scenes. Listen, if you choose; if not, shut your ears—I care not!

"I can see it now, plain as though not an hour had passed away! The altar—the brilliant gathering—the lovely bride—the stately father and the venerable padre; I can see it all! I can even see myself, younger, handsomer, proud and triumphant, for I had but one dream of an earthly paradise then—and that I expected to find more than realized in the loving arms of my beautiful bride! Ha! ha! poor fool! Like all those who place their trust in woman, I was fated to have my eyes opened full soon!" he uttered, with intense bitterness as he flashed a burning glance into the pale face of Ysabel.

She noticed him not. Her eyes were fixed upon the stout cross where the black-faces were at work. In face, eyes, could be traced a deadly horror. Only too well did she know the meaning of that work—only too truly divine the first use to which that cross was to be put!

A gleam of vicious joy swept across the face of the man who reclined at her side, but he made no comment just then. He knew that no words of his could increase the torture his captive was then undergoing, silent though she was.

"The padre was addressing us before proceeding with the ceremony—curses on his proximity! Only for that—bah! It was fated to be! What matter now?"

"He came—that Yankee swine, with his rough riders. He rode right through the gathering and up to the very altar. He struck me down, before I knew my danger. You leaped into his arms, and then you fled."

"It was a bold plan, dashingly carried out. You see, I can be candid, even in speaking of a bitter enemy," he interpolated, with a harsh, disagreeable laugh, as he reached over and began to toy with the jetty hair of his helpless captive.

Still, Ysabel made no sign to show that she heard his voice or felt his touch. Still she gazed with wild eyes at that terrible piece of workmanship, now nearing completion.

"Yes, it was a bold deed, and coming at such a time, not one of us all dreamed of such a thing. It threw us all into confusion, but not for long. Those were days of war, bloody and desperate, and sudden alarms were too frequent to produce confusion for more than a very few minutes."

"I was badly wounded, but I was the first man in the saddle, the first to strike the trail, and my wild passions carried me far ahead of my comrades. I was riding for more than life, more than love—for revenge, dark and deadly."

"Better for me had my prudence been greater, or my horse less fleet and stanch! Better for me had I waited for my friends. But I could not reason then. I was mad—my blood was boiling—my heart was suffocating me! I have never fully recovered from that terrible trial—I never will!"

"You, Yankee dog, left a squad of your men behind to act as rear-guard. They saw me coming in chase, and hiding, they shot my horse. As it fell, I was cast so heavily that my senses left me—only to return with the smarting lash of the whip!"

"Ay!" with a savage grating of his strong white teeth; "the hounds were lashing me like a sheep-stealing cur! They had thrown my friends off the track for the moment, and coming to a halt, were flogging me, turn and turn about!"

"As you flogged two of our poor fellows, not a month before; whipped them with your own hand, until they died beneath the cruel lash!" sternly cried Randal Talfourd.

"They were dogs—they were born for the whip," retorted Despilfarro, the words of his prisoner seeming to suddenly restore his coolness.

He waited a moment, as though expecting Talfourd to say something more, but as the mine owner maintained silence, he resumed, speaking rapidly, but with less fire than before:

"They lashed me until my back was deeply scored—I still bear the marks—and their arms grew weary. Then they twisted a noose for my neck, and drew me up to the limb of a tree. I was choking, dying, when I was suddenly let drop, and when I recovered my senses, it was to find myself in the hands of friends, who had come upon the devils so suddenly and unexpectedly that they had not the time to finish their work before death overtook them."

"It was long weeks before I could leave my bed, and during that time, you made your escape and hid your charming bride. Twice we met in battle, after that, but each time you escaped my vengeance. Then came the end, and our party triumphed over the usurper. You escaped—the devil still standing your friend. And then year after year went by, through all of which I kept up my search for you. My friends and the other members of the order gave up all hope. They believed death had robbed them of their victim; but I knew better. My wrongs were too deep, my hatred too bitter for fate to so deeply wrong me. Sinner or

later I knew we would meet—and you see I was right!

"I struck a clew at last, and followed it up like a true bloodhound. I enlisted the aid of the Sons of the Fiery Cross—and here you lie, waiting for the punishment which will complete my oath of vengeance!"

"You are proving false to your sacred vows!" suddenly cried Ysabel, her black eyes flashing. "That, or you are a base pretender, enlisting machinery in which you hold no interest!"

"Pray, may I ask what you mean, lady-bird?" he sneered.

"This! the doom of the burning cross is only for treacherous members of the order. No women are ever admitted to the Family, hence you cannot punish me by fire, without rendering yourself liable to the same fearful fate—"

"Do not borrow trouble, darling," laughed the villain. "I have a sweeter fate in store for you, never fear!"

"Nor was my husband ever a member of your vile order!"

"He shall have a chance to prove the truth of your claim before many more minutes. Well for him if he can do so! For I charge him with being a false Son of the Fiery Cross! You are wise enough to know what that means. Your father belonged to the order, as well as I. Randal Talfourd wronged us both, most bitterly. For a brother to injure another means death by the burning cross; and sure as there is a heaven above us as I utter these words, if proven guilty, Randal Talfourd dies!"

"Peace, Ysabel," broke in the deep tones of the mine-owner, as the half-crazed woman was about to burst out anew. "You can do no good by arguing with the cowardly hound. He has made up his mind to murder me, and your pleading only increases his satanic triumph. For my sake, notice him not."

With a gasping moan, the wife obeyed. Despilfarro showed his teeth in a savage grin, as he spat out the words:

"You talk brave enough now, dog of a Yankee, but wait until the chains bind you fast to the cross, and the tongues of fire begin to crawl over your face and breast! Look! the work of those who were once your true and loving brothers, is almost done! How do you like the prospect?"

The rude timbers were firmly fastened together, making a cross nearly double the length of a man. One end was sharpened to plant into the ground. Small chains were fastened to the arms and the upright piece, evidently meant to bind the victim to the cross and hold him thus until the flames had done the frightful work appointed them.

And as they watched, the black-faces planted the cross near the extremity of the point, setting the sharpened end in the soft earth, not upright, but leaning at an angle over the silently-flowing water. From the top, and the extreme ends of both arms, they hung chains, to the ends of which stout rawhide ropes were run up to the tree-limbs, then brought down and securely fastened. This made the cross steady enough to maintain the weight of a man upon it without falling into the water. Near the base of the cross were piled dry fagots in abundance, the use of which was only too readily understood.

As the black-faces completed their preparations and glanced toward their chief, Ramon Despilfarro leaped to his feet and donned his sable mask once more.

Cold, hard and un pitying sounded his voice as he spoke to the bound and helpless mine-owner:

"The time has come, Randal Talfourd, false brother, for you to answer as best you can the dread charges which have been made against your truth and fidelity. If you have any defense to offer, shape it in your mind, for I am about to call the tribunal to order."

At a wave of his hand, the black-faces came nearer.

CHAPTER XV.

SENTENCED TO THE CROSS.

SILENT, erect, with their arms folded over their breasts, the black-faces stood in a semi-circle before their chief, awaiting his further instructions.

"Sons of the Fiery Cross—my children!" he spoke, his tall figure drawn rigidly erect, his tones cold, hard and clear as those of a bell, not the slightest trace of passion or excitement being visible in either voice or manner. "It is not an ordinary occasion which calls us to assemble in solemn council this night. To the honor of our beloved Order, be it said that cases of treachery and broken vows are few and far between. Many of you have never been called upon to sit in judgment on an erring brother brought to trial, and some of you may have doubts as to your exact duty under such circumstances. The laws which govern our Family are brief and readily comprehended, but it will do no harm for me to refresh your memory on certain points of interest.

"The archives of our Most Noble Order show that it first came into existence hundreds of years ago, long before this soil was ever trodden by the foot of white men, among the moun-

tains of old Spain. Two brothers formed the first compact, to defend themselves the better against their enemies. From them the pledges and vows were handed down to their sons, and thus, generation after generation, the Order grew and flourished and spread all over the land. The two brothers became scores, the scores hundreds, the hundreds swelled into thousands, until now, wherever the sun shines, it looks down upon branches of our Blessed Order!"

"With the passage of ages the simple compact entered upon by those two brothers has become amplified until it forms an almost perfect law of protection and retribution; a blessing to those who live up to their sacred pledges, but a terrible scourge for all traitors!"

"If a Son of the Fiery Cross calls for aid, those of the Order who hear him must instantly respond, even though certain death stares them in the face. There is no alternative. The brother who hesitates or pauses to ask whether such an appeal is justifiable under the laws of the Order, renders himself amenable to discipline; if he refuses to respond, he is to be adjudged a traitor and false to his sacred vows, then punished accordingly."

"But the apex of criminality can only be attained by those who willfully and deliberately wrong a brother, or shed his blood, otherwise than by the express commands of those who hold the power of life and death in their hands, by virtue of their office and high degree."

"There can be but one penalty prescribed for a crime of this dastardly stripe—death upon the burning cross!"

As the masked chief ceased speaking, he motioned two of the black-faces to advance and raise Randal Talfourd to his feet. Knowing how futile would be any resistance on his part, the mine-owner submitted without a struggle, his face proudly scornful as he stood facing the chief.

"Randal Talfourd—for you are no longer Brother while such grave charges are pending—you are brought before this court of justice, charged with having broken your sacred vows and most solemn pledges to be forever true and faithful to each and every member of the Family. How say you—guilty or not guilty?"

A short, hard laugh broke from the accused man's lips.

"Do you expect me to aid you in playing this ridiculous farce? Bah! you are no less fool than dirty scoundrel!" he cried, in tones of utter contempt and scorn.

In the same hard, unmoved tones, the masked chief spoke again:

"By the laws which govern our trials, when the accused refuses to plead, the court has the privilege of entering a plea for him, either guilty or not guilty, as it deems most wise. Randal Talfourd pleads not guilty to the charge, and demands a fair and full trial by the Children of the Cross."

"You have no right—you are a false brother yourself!" cried Ysabel, springing to her feet in a paroxysm of rage and terror. "You are defying the laws of the League by trying an alien—one over whose actions you have no jurisdiction!"

A wave of his hand, and two of the Sons of the Fiery Cross advanced and caught the almost frantic wife by the arms and held her helpless. A quick but tender glance from the doomed mine-owner calmed her as by magic. Trembling violently from head to foot, the poor woman yielded to love what force could not win.

"It is charged against you, Randal Talfourd, in the first place, that you were regularly proposed as a member of this League; that you were voted for and elected; that you were duly sworn in and initiated according to the rules which govern our Order. Do you deny this?"

The prisoner made no reply, standing between his guards proudly erect, his burning, scornful gaze fixed upon the black mask of his chief enemy.

"You refuse to plead. It is a mute admission of guilt, but the Children of the Burning Cross are prosecutors, not persecutors. I record your plea as not guilty."

"My children," he added, turning toward the semi-circle of grim and silent figures: "you have heard the plea made by the accused. Are there any among your number who can offer proof for or against the truth of this first charge?"

"I can, Father," uttered a tall figure, promptly stepping inside the circle. "I can swear that—"

"Swear him—administer the oath as prescribed by the laws of the Order which you are so shamefully prostituting!" cried Ysabel Tal-

* It may not be entirely out of place in this connection to state that the idea of the secret society, so frequently alluded to in these pages, is not wholly original with the present writer. It was and still is an authentic fact. It has numerous "circles" in old Mexico to-day, and branches are regularly working in several of the United States at this writing. Originally, it was formed as a secret but terrible check to oppression and injustice, but like many another league, "though conceived in virtue, it hath turned to iniquity." The "Black Hand Brotherhood" of Spain belongs to the Order.

fourd, her tones showing how terribly she was feeling the part allotted to her and hers in this grim farce.

Without turning his head, the masked chief waved his hand, and the struggling woman was deftly gagged by a thick bandage being wound around her face, permitting her only the free use of her eyes.

"You are a Son in good standing?"

"Let my brothers answer for me," was the quiet response.

"He is true and faithful; we are ready to answer for him with hand, head and heart!" came the reply in chorus from each pair of masked lips.

The chief bowed slightly, then spoke again:

"It is well. We are waiting to hear and weigh your testimony, my child. Speak without fear or favor!"

"What I have to say will not occupy very much of your valuable time, Father," was the calm reply. "I formed the acquaintance of the accused, early in the Spring of the year 1866, in Old Mexico. He was then a colonel in the royal army. I was a captain under his command. Though he was an American, while I was born in Mexico, and stood lower in rank, we became close and firm friends. It was this intimacy that led me to propose and present him as a candidate for election to the Order of the Sons of the Fiery Cross. He was elected, and I assisted at his initiation. Shortly after that, I was wounded and taken prisoner by the Liberals. I never met the accused again until this night. My Father, I have no more to offer."

As the black-face bowed, with hands folded across his chest, the chief turned to the prisoner, demanding:

"You have heard the evidence, prisoner; what have you to say in your defense?"

"That I never called a man friend, who dared not show his face to the light of day," was the cold, contemptuous reply. "That I never joined any such order. That the masked cur who has just spoken, lies willfully from start to finish!"

"You have ears, my Son," spoke the masked chief, turning again to the witness. "The accused declares that you are giving false evidence. What reply do you make?"

"That I am ready to take oath to the truth of my words."

The masked chief lifted his hand. The witness dropped upon his knees. The black-faces gathered about him in a compact circle, each right hand grasping a bared blade. And then, his muffled voice sounding hollow and sepulchral, the chief pronounced the oath in sections, the witness repeating the formula in distinct tones after him:

"By the Burning Cross—by the Running Stream—by the Ashes of Death and the Broth of Hell—I swear that my words contain naught but truth!"

"If I have perjured myself, may the steel of my Brethren find a living sheath in my bosom!"

"We have heard, and it is well!" came in deep chorus from the lips of the masked brethren, as they fell back to their former position, permitting the witness to arise.

"Randal Talfourd, we have listened to the evidence, and are convinced that in the year 1866, you were duly made a member of this Order. If the contrary had been made apparent, this trial could have gone no further. You would have been, as an alien, amenable only to those whom your deeds had injured; as a recreant brother, you come within our jurisdiction, and unless you can plainly disprove the charges which are yet to be brought against you, the full penalty for treacherous conduct and breach of faith, as decreed by the Supreme Council, will be visited upon you."

"Bah!" bitterly cried the mine-owner, his eyes flashing with mingled hatred and scorn.

"Why all this ridiculous mummery! You have condemned and sentenced me in advance. Put your murderous thoughts into action without any more delay. I am a man—you can neither break down my nerve nor make me beg for mercy at your hands—accursed villain!"

This fierce outburst was occasioned by the sight of the terrible torture which his wife was undergoing, helpless as she was, and the brave man who felt that there was no earthly show for escape, longed for the end, if only for her sake.

Raymon Despilfarro readily divined his motive, and the ugly glitter of his eyes showed how intensely he was enjoying his dastardly revenge.

One by one, other witnesses were called and gave in their evidence. One gave a brief outline of the daring manner in which Randal Talfourd claimed his promised bride as she stood at the foot of the altar, striking down the man who fancied the prize already fairly won.

A second black-face swore that Raymon Despilfarro was at that time and ever since, a member in good standing. He also swore that Ferdinand Espinoza, father of the stolen bride, was a Brother, which testimony was corroborated by several others of the Order then present.

This appeared to exhaust the charges brought

against the accused, and the masked chief again addressed the band:

"My children. You have listened to the evidence; you have heard the testimony offered by your brothers, to the truth of which they have taken solemn oath. It is for you to say whether or no the accused is proven guilty of breaking his sacred vows. His case now lies in your hands. Do you require time for consideration?"

In prompt chorus came the answer, in the negative.

"It is well. Speak, without fear or prejudice. Do you find the accused guilty, or not guilty, as charged?"

"Guilty! He has violated his sacred vows! He has willfully injured his brethren of the Cross! There is naught that can be said in extenuation for his crimes! We demand, oh, Father! that you pronounce upon him the sentence of death which is reserved alone for traitors! We have spoken!"

"Randal Talfourd, once trusted and well beloved Son of the Fiery Cross, but now hated and accused by all true hearts of the Order, you have been tried and found guilty. Guilty of maliciously and wantonly doing grievous wrong to your fellow-members, whose rights should have been held sacred by you.

"As the head of this circle, and one in whom is vested the power of life or death by virtue of my rank in our beloved Order, I am called upon to pronounce your doom. I have no option, after the verdict delivered by these good men and true; I can only repeat the sentence which is written in the laws by which we are governed:

"We give your body to the Burning Cross—your ashes to the Running Water, to make broth for the demon who first tempted you to prove false to your sacred vows!"

In grim and sepulchral chorus the circle of black faces repeated this horrible formula after the masked chief. There was a brief silence, then there came the chanted addition:

"We have heard, and it is well!"

Raymon Despilfarro waved his hand, and four of the band grasped the condemned mine-owner, dragging him rudely toward the wooden cross, when Ysabel, rendered frantic by the sight, broke the thongs which held her hands, tore a knife from the girdle of her guard, and with an inarticulate cry from her bandaged lips, sprung upon the masked chief, striking savagely at his throat with the gleaming weapon.

He wheeled at her cry, but it was too late to save himself entirely from that vengeful blow.

CHAPTER XVI.

SLEEK SAM SWEARS TO GET EVEN.

"HELLO the house, an' be durned to ye!"

"Open up your carryvan, ye cussed yaller-belly!"

"White men an' yaller money poundin' at yer do', ole boss! Slide out o' yer nest an' let 'em in!"

"Third time an' last call—open up, or over goes your apple-cart ef it does spill all yer peaches!"

In drunken succession came these loud appeals to Diego Zarate, punctuated and emphasized by thumps of fists and kicks from cow-hide boots against the closed front door. Two rough-looking customers stood before the portals, leaning against each other with one arm twined lovingly around the other's neck as they took turns in assaulting the barrier and summoning the silent warder. At first in drunken good humor, but as only the dull echoes of their own heavy thumps came to answer them, their tempers took fire.

"Shell it come fer to pass, Doc, that two free-born white men is locked out o' a public boardin'-house, when they're so durn sleepy they can't scarcely hold thar eyes open with the p'int of a match! Must we bunk in the gutter, jest beca'se that durned hog of a Greaser can't bear thunder when it bu'sts right under his nose! Shell we, or shain't we?"

"Not ef the court knows herself, which—gi' me room 'ordin' to my size!"

Gravely unwinding the arm which clung so lovingly about his neck, Doc shook it solemnly for a couple of moments, then backed steadily away from the door, eying it with drunken gravity. Then, shaking his head like a bull before whose front is flashed the irritating red flag, he plunged forward and dashed his broad shoulders against the barrier. Almost without resistance the door gave way, and the human catapult tumbled end over end across the threshold, bringing up with a loud grunt of utter disgust.

"Dan'el, you durn fool, the door wasn't fastened a-tall!" he exclaimed, in a tone of grieved reproach, as he managed to attain a sitting posture, hugging his knees with locked hands. "Dan'el, why didn't you try the knob in the fust place?"

At that moment a heavy, bumping sound came from the second story, and scrambling to his feet with an alacrity hardly to be expected after his recent exploit in the acrobatic line, Doc muttered:

"That's the Greaser now—jumpin' out o' bed fer to come an' see what's the matter down here! Steady, pard, an' ef he shoots you, I'll

sw'ar out a warrant ag'inst him fer disturbin' of the peace. Face him boldly—The good Lawd!"

A frantic leap carried him across the threshold as a hollow, groaning sound came to their ears, apparently proceeding from one of the shadowed corners of the hall. Swift as he, Dan'el leaped after, catching the trembling drunkard by the arm, and checking his uncertain flight, growling:

"Tain't no ghost, you pesky idjit! Thar's crooked work bin done in yender, an' we got to git to the rights of it. I ketched a glimps' o' the critter, an' ef it wasn't ole Diego hisself, trussed up like a pig in a poke, then I hope to never git outside o' four-fingers ag'in!"

Seemingly sobered in a great measure by the shock, he forced his mate to bear him company back to the hall, where they discovered Diego Zarate, bound and gagged, lying on his hard pallet of dry hides.

They pelted him with eager questions as they cut his bonds and freed his jaws from the gag, but the Mexican only moaned and groaned, apparently unable to articulate plainly.

He started as there came the muffled sounds of thumping from the upper region, and hoarsely whispered:

"Paquita—my wife—go see!"

With trembling hands, Zarate caught the lamp from its bracket, and leaning on the strong arm of the most sober of his rescuers, crept upstairs toward the room from which that pounding noise proceeded. A cry of amazement escaped his lips as he opened the door and saw, not his wife, but a bound man.

"Durned ef the ole woman hain't putt on the—Hello! ef it ain't Sleek Sam, I'm a howl-in' liar!"

With right good will Dan'el set his knife to work, and when the many folds of the tough rawhide were severed and the suffocating gag removed, he assisted the gambler to rise from the floor, to which he had voluntarily rolled from the bed when that rude assault at the front door came to his ears.

"Who done it—an' what fur—an' how was it, anyhow?" gasped Doc, his bleared eyes almost starting from his head as he stared around him, then starting nervously back as Sleek Sam flashed a keen glance into his face. "Good Lawd! it wasn't me—I didn't hev nothin' to do with it! Ax Dan'el!"

"A mate o' mine, boss," was the apologetic mutter. "Good enough critter when he ain't too drunk. Gittin' purty cluss to the land o' snakes jest now, which makes him sorter nervous."

"Go—there's been black work here to-night!" hoarsely cried Sleek Sam, clutching at his throat with his white fingers, as though to suppress the strained muscles.

"Whar an' which an' how, boss? Jest gi' me a hint o' what you want did, an' you'll see the ole man jest a-flyin'!"

"Help—raise men! A hundred dollars for each mounted man you can bring here! Hasten—it's for life, man!"

Sleek Sam suddenly broke off, for the first time catching sight of the trembling figure of Diego Zarate, who had slunk into a corner. One bound, and he grasped the Mexican by the throat, shaking him savagely, growling:

"You treacherous cur! You let those devils in—"

Cat-like, Dan'el leaped to his side, one hand touching the gambler on the shoulder, as he spoke earnestly:

"Deed, I don't reckon he's to blame, boss, fer we found him trussed up an' gagged, jest like you was. Not that a Greaser more or less matters much," he added, coolly, as Sleek Sam relaxed his grip and suffered the terrified Mexican to sink to the floor in a trembling heap; "but I didn't know as you'd want to choke him through a mistake."

"Go—spread the alarm and gather men for hard riding and desperate work. A hundred dollars apiece for good and true men—hasten!"

The two men turned and dashed out of the room, the voice of Doc coming back above the echo of their boots on the stairway:

"A capital C a head! Good Lawd! ef this measly little burg was only as big as Denver—what a bonanza!"

Like wildfire, the alarm was spread through New Babylon, and in less than half an hour from the time that Sleek Sam rose a free man from his bonds, the entire population of the town was gathered in the moonlight before the house of Diego Zarate, listening to the swift speech of the gambler.

Sleek Sam did not waste many words. Rapidly he told how he had been surprised in his sleep by the masked villains, who afterward left him helpless, bound and gagged, while they bore away Randal Talfourd, and his wife and daughter.

"I suffered the tortures of the damned, as I lay there helpless. Not for myself, but for thinking of what might befall those hapless ladies in the power of such dastardly scoundrels! I swore then that I would get even with them one and all! That I would bitterly avenge whatever wrong they might put upon my friend and his family; and now I call upon

all honest and true men within sound of my voice, to aid me in bringing those hell-hounds to justice, even if we are too late to rescue their victims unharmed."

"We're with ye, boss!" cried out Dan'el, loudly.

A chorus of shouts and yells told that the stalwart miner but gave voice to the sentiments of the crowd.

"Good!" cried Sleek Sam, his eyes all aglow. "You shall not regret doing your duty. I will give one thousand dollars for each of the three persons kidnapped, if rescued alive and unharmed. One hundred apiece for all of the kidnappers killed or captured. And even if unsuccessful, I will reward each and every man who takes part in this night's search."

A perfect whirlwind of yells and cheers greeted this truly munificent offer, but a wave of the gambler's white hand brought silence instead.

Then he hastily added:

"We have no time to waste in idle noise. At best it will be a blind search, until the coming of day gives us light enough to find the trail. Yet we must not wait sucking our fingers until then, or our friends may be placed far beyond our reach. We must go it blind at the start—and may a kind Providence guide some of us aright!"

Sleek Sam hastily divided the volunteers into several bands, retaining a dozen of the best mounted men for his own immediate following. The other parties he dispatched in hot haste to scour the country in different directions, then leaping into the saddle, he rode rapidly away from New Babylon on the road leading to the northwest.

He drew rein when the party reached the spot where the dead horse lay in its blood, and glanced over his following.

"Who among you claims to be the best hand at a trail?" he demanded, sharply. "Ha! is that you, Cat-eyes?"

"Si senior," was the quick response, as a little, shriveled and dried-up looking Mexican advanced a step, saluting.

"Good! I would sooner see your ugly mug than to stumble upon a bonanza! Get down and see what you can discover."

For several minutes the Mexican groped over the ground like a hound seeking a lost scent, then he moved rapidly along the road. At a little distance the horsemen followed him, and a glad cry escaped the lips of Sleek Sam as the trailer suddenly plunged from the main road into a narrow side-path.

"The critter is runnin' wild!" muttered one of the party as they follow after. "No livin' man could pick up a trail on sech ground as this, 'specially in the night time!"

"Silence in the ranks!" sternly cried Sleek Sam.

Five minutes later, the Mexican paused, pointing to the scored and trampled ground around the roots of the trees.

"Here they took saddle, master," he said, quietly.

"You are sure?"

"My head on it, captain. Maybe you know this!"

He held up a little knot of scarlet ribbon in the clear moonlight, Sleek Sam caught at it and examined it closely.

"You are right! Miss Talfourd wore this at her throat when I saw her last! On, my good lad—quickly!"

"Runnin' wild, is he?" muttered Dan'el, with a sniff of scornful triumph as the party moved on after the trailer, who led the way at a rapid lope. "That shows your ignorance, mate. Cat-eyes kin see better in the night than we kin in the daytime, an' he kerries a nose that would make the best houn' as ever wore ha'r, sick in a holy minnit! Ef we don't rake in them ducats, it'll be beca'se the p'izen critters hes stole themselves wings an' tuck to flyin' over the tree-tops!"

There seemed good foundation for this extravagant eulogy, for the little Mexican kept up his tireless lope without break or check, for mile after mile. Here and there, where the shadows lay deepest, he would bend until his face almost brushed the ground, giving him a grotesque resemblance to a bound running mute by scent, but his speed was not perceptibly lessened, even then. Truly, a marvel of trailers was Cat-eyes!

Then he came to an abrupt halt, turning to his chief.

"What is it, Cat-eyes?" hurriedly demanded Sleek Sam.

"The trail divides, master," and a motion of the skinny hand traced three separate courses. "Two horse go there, six yonder, and seven keep straight on. Your orders, captain?"

For a brief space Sleek Sam hesitated, glancing doubtfully over his expectant followers. Then he said shortly:

"There is no help for it that I can see. We must stick together. Cat-eyes is the only man among us all who can follow a trail with any certainty in the night. It may be that the devils will come together again; if not, we must take them in detail. Follow the largest force, Cat-eyes."

Without a word of comment the Mexican set off again, in the old tireless lope or trot that carried him over the ground quite as rapidly as the horsemen could follow without letting their animals gallop. The way was rough and intricate in places, but through them all the marvelous skill of the Mexican carried them, whether by sight, scent or instinct, without halt or break for more than an hour. Then his pace began to slacken. His bent form grew more erect, and instead of keeping his eyes fixed upon the ground, they roved swiftly around, his head moving with the uncertain motion of a pointer that is just catching the faint scent of game without anything to show from whence it comes. Then he paused, waving one hand in signal for the party to come to a halt.

"I smell smoke, master!" he muttered, as Sleek Sam rode up to his side. "There is an eddy of wind whirling through this hollow, and I can't place it with certainty; but I am willing to lay my head that the game is not half a mile away from the spot where we now stand."

Sleek Sam raised his head and sniffed at the air, but then gave a short laugh as his senses failed to detect any peculiar or unusual taint in the atmosphere.

"You are sure, Cat-eyes! Every minute counts now, and a break here may prove fatal to our hopes of rescue."

"I smell smoke," was the quiet but resolute reply. "You know there is no person living in this section. Indians do not range here. There is no show for prospectors. Who else would be burning wood but those whose trail we have followed straight to this place?"

"What do you advise, then?"

"That you wait here with the men, while I creep on and find out just where the fire is, and who built it."

"Go, then; but make all haste!"

Silently as a shadow, the trailer glided away and was almost instantly lost to view.

Silently, keeping their saddles, the party awaited for the return of the Mexican. To some it seemed a long time, but in reality not a quarter of an hour passed away before the Mexican trailer returned, Sleek Sam advancing to meet him.

"My head is safe, senor," said the man, with a grim smile.

"They are there, then?" eagerly demanded the gambler.

"Gone into camp, senor, as I suspected. Just over that rise you can catch a glimpse of the fire. To make sure, I went further, until I could see and count them."

"And the prisoners? They are with them?"

"I saw two: a man and a woman. Her face was hidden, so I know not whether it was the old or the young woman."

For a brief space the two men stood silent, the others anxiously watching them. Then Sleek Sam suddenly spoke aloud:

"I will creep over and see how the land lies for myself. Dan, you will take command while I am gone. Do not move unless you should hear me shoot; then charge in as fast as you can. I will not give the alarm if I can help it; but it is barely possible that I may be discovered by some of the rascals."

He did not wait for an answer, but resigning his horse to the care of Cat-eyes, Sleek Sam glided away through the night.

As the spy had stated, he caught a glimpse of a dim red light the moment he crossed over the little ridge, but a body of trees prevented him from discovering more without stealing still closer.

This he did without hesitation, and displaying no mean degree of skill in his movements. Not a sound betrayed his progress as he crept down the little slope and across the comparatively level ground which lay beyond, and though the red light grew brighter as he proceeded, and there came to his ears the faint sound of human voices, the foliage of the trees and undergrowth effectually prevented him from catching a plainer view of what was going on in front.

Slower and more careful became his progress as he drew nearer the scene of action, for a single false step or ill-judged movement might easily betray him to the enemy. Yard by yard he crept on, cautiously parting the bushes before him as for the first time he caught a glimpse of the red sparkle of the flames. Noiselessly he drew himself up on his knees and enlarged the opening sufficiently for him to take in the terrible—the soul-sickening scene before him.

One sharp, painful gasp, then he seemed turned to stone for the time being. Only no eyes of statue ever glowed and glittered as did his just then. And then, drawing his pistols, Sleek Sam leaped from cover, with a wild, hoarse shout:

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLAZING CROSS.

RAYMON DESPILFARRO wheeled upon the frenzied woman as she burst her bonds and made that wild assault, but so totally unexpected was the move, that with all his activity

and address, he was unable to wholly frustrate her purpose.

He instinctively flinched from the flashing steel, throwing up one arm in the effort to ward off the blow, but he was too late to save himself a terrible wound. A savage snarl escaped his lips as he felt the keen blade tear its way through his throat, and for the moment he believed his head had been half severed from its trunk.

His wrist struck the arm of the nearly crazed woman, partially benumbing it and knocking the blood-dripping weapon from her hand, far away over the bushes. Gnashing his teeth like a mad beast, he grasped her by the shoulder, then dashed his clinched fist full in her face. A choking cry was all. Then, without even a groan, Ysabel Talfourd sunk at his feet, senseless if not killed outright by that dastard blow.

And Raymon Despilfarro staggered back against the trunk of a tree, clasping his throat with both hands, moaning and cursing as the red blood gushed freely over his fingers.

Randal Talfourd, bound and helpless though he was, made a desperate struggle in the grasp of his startled guards, actually shaking them off as he dashed his head with terrible force into the face of one of their number, hurling him backward to the ground with crushed and battered features. But then, forgetting that his feet were tightly bound together as he witnessed that dastard blow of his old-time rival, he tried to leap to the aid of his stricken wife, only to trip and fall heavily to the ground.

All this passed with the rapidity of thought, though it has taken some time to describe it in detail, and as he staggered back to the support of the tree-trunk, Raymon Despilfarro saw his men pounce upon the fallen mine-owner.

Even then, when he believed that his life was pouring out of his severed jugulars, the devilish hatred which animated him found vent in a hoarse cry:

"Don't kill! The cross—they must both burn!"

Several of the black-faces hastened to his assistance as he sunk down upon the ground, feeling faint and believing himself at the very point of death, while the others looked after their prisoners, bearing Ysabel away, and pinning her husband firmly, despite his furious struggles.

"Bring a torch—hasten!" muttered one of those who bent over the masked chief, speaking in a tone of authority.

With gentle force he unclasped the trembling fingers of the wounded man, flashing the lurid light full upon the hurt.

Ghastly enough it looked to the unprofessional eye, seeming as though the entire throat was torn or cut away, but a grunt of satisfied relief broke from the lips of the old man.

"It is nothing—a flea-bite, Father! A stitch or two, a little plaster, a tight collar and moderate caution for a week, will make you sound enough. In a month, the only way you can tell that you were ever hurt, will be to hunt for the scar!" he said, speaking cheerily as he handed the torch to another of the black-faces, taking a small case of surgical tools from his breast-pocket.

"You're sure, Pacheco?" faintly uttered Despilfarro, a glow of hope beginning to come into his eyes. "You are not lying, simply to soothe my last hours?"

"It would be a bold man who ventured to lie to you, Father, even for your own good," was the quiet reply.

"But I felt—I thought my jugulars were severed!"

"If they had been, Father, you never would have dealt the blow that struck the she-cat to your feet. It is as I tell you. The windpipe escaped injury, and only the minor veins were severed. Trust yourself to me, and my head upon it, you will suffer no great inconvenience from this little mishap."

Raymon Despilfarro said no more, but as the surgeon removed the mask from his face and gently lowered his head to a more convenient position, great relief was depicted upon the face of the black-face chief. It was almost like being raised from the grave, so surely had he deemed his hurt mortal.

Pacheco proved a skillful hand, and ere long the ghastly cut was sewn up, plastered and bandaged snugly.

"You will do now, Father," he said, respectfully, as he rose to his feet and put away his case. "Only ordinary care will be necessary, and you have no call to fear the result."

"Thanks to you, my son!" and their hands met in a warm grasp. "I will not forget what you have done."

"Only my duty, as one of the Sacred League, Father."

"And the woman—I did not kill her?"

"I cannot say. I had thoughts only for you."

Walking a little uncertainly, though this was more the result of fear than of weakness, Raymon Despilfarro passed over to where he caught a glimpse of Ysabel Talfourd lying on the grass, and motioned the surgeon to examine her.

"She is senseless, but not dead," was the deliberate reply, after a careful examination. "You struck her a terrible blow, and I marvel

that your fist did not crush in her temple; but she will live, I feel confident."

There was something so peculiar in the tone and expression of the old surgeon, that Despilfarro started, then asked:

"You are concealing something—what is it?"

"You have sharp eyes and ears, my Father," muttered the veteran, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "She will live, I have little doubt; but if she ever fully recovers her reason it will be a miracle in my eyes!"

"Mad—insane?" hoarsely muttered Despilfarro.

Pacheco simply bowed assent, carefully keeping his glowing eyes from meeting those of his master. Despilfarro stood moodily gazing down upon the pale face of the motionless woman, on whose temple there was distinctly visible the trace of his iron knuckles; but then, with a short, hard laugh, he turned on his heel and moved away.

"So much the worse for her! I did not mean to kill the mad fool, but I could not stop to measure the force of my blow when I believed her cursed knife had reached my life!"

The surgeon ventured no reply to this muttered speech, and giving himself a shake, the masked chief seemed to cast aside all thoughts other than those connected with his duty as Father of the Circle.

"It is time for our work to be carried out, my children!" he said, with an assumption of austere gravity that but poorly accorded with the devilish fire which glittered and glowed in his black eyes. "The light is increasing in the East. The sun will soon make its appearance, and ere it shows its face, the fire and the water must have completed their work."

"The cross is ready; prepare the prisoner for the doom your lips have pronounced upon him."

The black-faces who knelt beside Randal Talfourd, holding him firmly, tightened their grasp at this speech, lifting him bodily from the ground and bearing him over to the foot of the cross. Here they were surrounded by their fellows, each and every one seeming blood-thirstily eager to have a share in preparing the sacrifice.

Pale and composed, at least outwardly, Randal Talfourd no longer seemed to think of resisting the inevitable. He knew that his wife was either dead or insensible, from the effects of that dastardly blow. In either case, helpless as he was, he could do her no good. His own fate was surely sealed beyond all earthly hope, and realizing this, he wished it all over with before his wife—if she still lived—could return to consciousness. At least, she would be spared the sight of his frightful tortures.

Thus the task of the black-faces was easier than they had any reason to anticipate, and in the course of a very few minutes, the preliminary work was done.

Two of their number nimbly climbed up the slightly swaying cross, and as the bonds which held the hands of the doomed man were severed, they pulled swiftly upon chains which were fastened to his wrists with handcuffs, stretching out his arms to their full extent before he could have made any use of them, had such been his intention. The chains were wrapped firmly around his arms and the cross, then locked by a spring padlock.

In a like manner his legs were secured, and other stout chains held his body immovable against the timber. Only his head was allowed the slightest liberty. And then, their share of the work completed, the black-faces drew aside.

"False and recreant member of a Most Noble Order," slowly uttered the masked chief, advancing to the foot of the cross, his eyes glowing with a most unholy fire as he gazed up into the pale face of his victim. "Your hour of atonement has arrived. Look your last upon the face of nature. Take your last look at the shapes of your betrayed brethren, for the veil of fire is about to descend over all!"

He stepped back and lifted his hand. A brace of black-faces came forward, bearing curious jars of metal in their hands. Others of the terrible band knelt around the foot of the cross, and stepping upon their shoulders, the chosen two proceeded to smear the cross over with a pungent smelling preparation, using wooden spatulas for the purpose.

The emptied jars were cast into the water, the black-faces descended, the kneeling men arose, and all stepped back.

Another motion, and other men scattered the dry fagots around the base of the cross. They, also, fell back as soon as their work was completed, and picking up a blazing brand from the fire, the chief strode forward, standing for a moment with his head bowed, as though breathing a silent invocation, then thrust the brand among the fagots.

He retreated, folding his arms over his chest as he watched the crawling flames, his eyes shining thrice as bright as they, and ten times more threatening and cruel.

Pale as death, but with his facial muscles hard-set, Randal Talfourd stared straight ahead of him at vacancy. Though he felt that he must die a most frightful death, he was resolved to give his merciless foe as little satisfac-

tion as possible, and almost fiercely he steeled his nerves to endurance.

Then—like a flash of lightning, the flames shot up and covered the cross with a dancing, leaping, snake-like mass of fire, darting out their scorching tongues of flame until the death-doomed mine-owner seemed suspended in a frame of living fire!

So sudden was the ignition that despite his steeled nerves and iron will, Randal Talfourd flinched and closed his eyes with a shudder of horror as a fiery tongue flashed across his face, singeing his beard and blistering the sensitive skin.

"His body to the Fiery Cross—his ashes to the Running Water, to make broth for the demon who tempted him to prove false to his sacred vows!"

In a deep, sepulchral tone the chief, once more masked, chanted the death-sentence. And in hollow chorus, the Brethren of the Fiery Cross repeated the words after him.

Higher leaped the bluish flames, their mad dance growing more fantastic, though there was not a breath of wind to cause their wild flickerings and darting in snake-like coils. Already there could be detected the scent of scorching flesh. The garments worn by the death-doomed man were beginning to blaze up; yet not a moan or groan escaped his gagged lips.

It was a frightful, soul-sickening sight; but thrilling though it was then, a moment later it became doubly so.

A wild, gurgling cry broke upon the air, and as the masked chief and his evil satellites turned on their heels, a light figure darted past them, and with a wailing moan, leaped into the air, clasping its arm about the man on the fiery cross!

It was Ysabel Talfourd, who had just recovered her senses sufficiently to realize the terrible situation of her husband and without pausing to count the cost, she rushed forward to rescue him or share his fate!

Unheeding the scorching flames, she hung to his form with one arm, while she tore at the rapidly-growing hot chains with her other hand, trying to set him at liberty. All in vain, as she only too soon perceived. And then, with both arms clasping him, she pressed her lips to his, moaning:

"Together, darling, even in death!"

For a brief space, the black-faces stood as though petrified, so complete was the surprise; but then, with a howling curse of furious rage, Raymon Despilfarro leaped forward to tear the devoted wife from the doomed victim.

In his mad haste, he trod on a round fagot, which rolled beneath his weight, casting him headlong to the ground with stunning violence—and to that fall, the masked chief undoubtedly owed his life.

With a sharp, ringing yell, the dark form of a human being broke cover, firing as he leaped toward the tragic scene, and his first bullet knocked the slouched hat from the head of Raymon Despilfarro as that vile rascal tripped and fell.

Once, twice, thrice the revolver barked in swift succession, with scarcely sufficient interval between the different reports for aim to be taken with any certainty, but one of the black-faces fell with each shot, writhing or motionless in death! So terrible was the surprise, that with wild yells of terror and dismay, the band scattered and rushed for cover, making no effort to check the swift rush of the bold rescuer.

Still yelling, he leaped across the body of Raymon Despilfarro, as that worthy made a move to regain his feet, and tearing the form of Ysabel Talfourd from the blazing cross, her garments already in a glow, he plunged from the point of land into the deep water below the burning cross.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SLEEK SAM TO THE FRONT.

THIS was the scene on which Samuel Oswald gazed like one spellbound or under the chilling influence of a nightmare.

The rigid figure of a human being stretched upon a cross of what seemed nothing more substantial than a mass of writhing, dancing flames.

Ranged around as witnesses of the frightful punishment, a dozen or more beings whose faces were hidden from view by sable masks, with one tall figure prominent among them, around whose throat was wound a blood-red bandage.

This, at the first glance: then the swift rush of the devoted wife. Her leaping upward and clinging around the neck of her husband, beating the scorching flames away from his dear face, tearing desperately at the rapidly-heating chains without thought of her own injuries. And then, when she saw how worse than vain were her efforts to rescue her loved one, to see her cling to his neck and press her lips to the jealous gag that cruelly separated his—to hear her cry that not even death should separate them!

Little wonder that Sleek Sam drew his pistols and gathered himself up to make a bold dash for their sake—but his were not the only eyes that had witnessed the fearful scene, nor his

the only hands that were preparing to strike a swift and desperate blow at the satanic band.

Sleek Sam rose to his feet with a wild yell, but even as he made his first leap through the dense undergrowth, a lithe shape shot past him at only a few yards to one side, a stream of fire shooting from its partially extended right hand, carrying death and consternation to the hearts of the black-faces!

Never was man more utterly taken by surprise than Sleek Sam on this occasion. Without the slightest reason to suspect the presence of another watcher, it seemed as though that wild and fierce yell of his had suddenly conjured up—a madman!

Unable to trust the evidence of his own eyesight, he stared blankly at the desperate rusher, until a false step of his own cast him heavily into the midst of a thorn-bush, the shock of the fall knocking both pistols from his hands.

This unlucky mishap seemed to restore the startled wits of the sport to something like their usual activity and clearness. Grasping his weapons, he scrambled to his feet, yelling shrilly:

"Here they are! Close in on 'em, lads! Don't let one of the dastardly devils get away—hurrah!"

Rapidly as his fingers could work the double-action revolvers, Sleek Sam fired shot after shot, cheering on his imaginary followers.

And this fresh assault, coming so closely upon that first surprise, proved too much for the nerves of the black-faces.

Yelling in fright, they broke ranks and fled at top speed to where their animals were snorting and tugging at their fastenings, alarmed by the wild uproar. Leaping into the saddles, the sadly demoralized gang of secret cut-throats plied spurs and lash in frantic flight.

Sleek Sam made no effort to either follow or hinder them from escaping, turning his entire attention to the luckless mine-owner whose situation was now truly horrible.

Even as he dashed along with bullet-splitting revolvers in full play, Sleek Sam noted the taut ropes which alone kept the fiery cross from toppling over into the deep waters, and dropping his smoking firearms, he snatched the keen knife from his girdle and struck at the raw hides. With a sharp twang they parted, and the blazing cross, with its scorching burden, plunged with a hissing splash over the point of land and into the deeply flowing water.

One more ringing shout to his men, and then Sleek Sam leaped into the stream beside the hissing, smoking, steaming timber. Dashing the streaming water from his eyes, the gambler grasped the massive cross and by a desperate exertion of strength, turned it fairly over until its blackened burden was uppermost.

With one arm Sleek Sam held the flame-scarred head above the water, striking out vigorously with his free hand, seeking to urge the cross nearer to shore, where he might touch bottom with his feet. It was no easy task, weighted down as he was, for the otherwise accomplished card-sharp was but an ordinary swimmer; but he lacked no grit, and clinching his teeth doggedly, he fought on, making the dark water fairly boil as his muscular arm tore through its yielding waves.

A most welcome sound came to his ears as he listened, and lifting his head high above the water, Sleek Sam shouted:

"This way, men! Make haste—I'm almost played!"

Crashing, plunging through the undergrowth came his men, led by the redoubtable Cat-eyes, one or two still mounted, but the large majority on foot, having temporarily abandoned their animals for the sake of making more rapid progress over the broken and difficult ground. Yelling and cheering, they broke into the opening, staring eagerly around, weapons drawn in readiness for use—but where were their enemies?

"This way—haste!" came in gasping, strangled accents from the water, and thus guided, the men almost tumbled over each other in their eagerness to lend their chief aid.

It came none too soon. Supporting the over-weighted upper end of the cross upon his left shoulder, keeping the head of the mine-owner above the surface, at his own expense, Sleek Sam found the dark waters lapping above his lips with each stroke he made, while his thoroughly saturated clothes and boots were dragging him down with a terrible weight that his moderate skill as a swimmer could not resist much longer.

With a dozen willing hands at the cross, and still others lending him a most welcome support, Sleek Sam ceased his desperate struggles until the land was safely reached.

"The poor devil is chained; carry all up to the light, where we can see to work," he panted, as the bank was gained.

His orders were obeyed. The cross with its sadly-disfigured burden was borne up to the level, where the scattered fire was rekindled, until its ruddy glow rendered all their surroundings perfectly clear.

Sleek Sam, unmindful of his water-streaming garments or his fatigue, knelt beside the cross and hastily examined the poor wretch. His

own face was white as that of a corpse, and his hands trembled violently as he made the examination; but then his repressed breath came in a long sigh of relief.

"He lives! I was afraid we came too late."

And yet, looking at the frightfully-scorched and blistered face and body, from which nearly every shred of clothing had fallen away or been licked up by the hungry flames, one could not help thinking that death would prove a more merciful and welcome boon than life.

"To work, men, but carefully!" cried Sleek Sam, himself setting the example. "Break these cursed chains, if you can manage it without hurting the poor fellow. If not, cut away the wood of the cross. We must have him free before he recovers his consciousness, unless we want him to go crazy!"

It was not found necessary to do either, for now that the heavy weight and strain was removed, the chains were found to be loose enough to be slipped from over the arms and legs of the mine-owner. Then, still under the direction and watchful care of Sleek Sam, Randal Talfourd was borne to a couch of folded blankets placed beneath a tree, out of sight of the spot where he so nearly met his death by fire.

"The boys has brung up thar critters, boss," ventured one of the party, as Sleek Sam stood moodily staring into the scarred face of the mine-owner. "Ef we reckon on ketchin' any o' them pizen imps, hedn't we better be lightnin' out?"

The gambler started, brushing one hand across his eyes like a man abruptly awaking from a dream. He stared quickly around, as though trying to recall his surroundings, then uttered a short, hard laugh as he spoke:

"I had forgotten all about them! Do as you like. I cannot leave my poor friend—and then, there is his wife who—"

He wheeled swiftly, and dropped a hand to one of the revolvers which he had recovered after rescuing the mine-owner, as something tapped him on the shoulder. His eyes were glowing redly, but they grew more natural as he recognized the man whose touch had so startled him.

"Well, Dan—what's up now?" he demanded, sharply.

"They's a critter over yander which mebbe you'd better take a look at," was the low response. "I found him layin' in the bresh, mighty nigh gone, ef I ain't mistook."

"What sort of a critter? A man, do you mean?"

"One o' the gang as we was a-chasin', I reckon. Leastways he's got a black liver all over his face, an'—"

"Where is he? Take me to him."

Hard and cold the tone. Whatever he might have been a few moments before, Sleek Sam was wide awake now.

He followed the man to where one of the black-faces lay gasping and moaning among the brush, and then motioned his guide to turn back. Kneeling beside the wounded man, Sleek Sam cut away the clothes around the blood-wet spot, and closely examined the wound. Nothing in his eyes or white, hard set countenance betrayed the conclusion to which he arrived, though the eyes of the wretch watched him so closely, so eagerly, yet fearfully.

"Is there any hope for me?" he gasped, painfully.

"Only this: tell me all about it, and conceal nothing," was the instant response, as Sleek Sam knelt again at his side and gently pressed back the rising form. "Hide nothing, and I will give you all the aid that lies in my power."

In sentences which were frequently broken by gasps of pain and struggles for breath, the wounded black-face complied with this condition. With bowed head, Sleek Sam listened, losing not a word, no matter how faint and indistinct the utterance. He remained motionless for a few moments after the husky voice died away, as though expecting to hear something further; but then he demanded:

"You have told me all?"

"Everything!" gasped the wounded wretch. "Now save me—I am dying—dying like a dog! Unshriven, uncared for!"

"Be patient. You shall have your reward, never fear," the gambler said coldly, as he rose to his feet.

A glance showed him that his men had not been idle while he was thus occupied. They stood beside their horses, hands on pommel, ready to mount and ride away in pursuit of the fleeing murderers, as soon as their leader was ready to start.

"You can tie up for a bit, my good fellows," said Sleek Sam, as he approached. "There's no particular rush."

"But—won't the durned critters git cl'ar off?" stammered one of the men, in amazement at this unexpected order.

"If crowded too close, they may," was the cool response. "I know the cover they are making for, and if they think we have thrown up our hands for this deal, they'll settle down all the more readily in the trap, and we'll make a clean sweep when we do swing for 'em. Besides, we can't leave this poor fellow here to die alone, and still call ourselves white!"

If not satisfied, the men were silenced, and quietly set about putting their animals where they could pick a mouthful of grass while waiting.

Sleek Sam passed over to where Randal Talfourd lay, his scorched and blistered limbs beginning to twitch with returning consciousness. It was a gruesome sight, and Sleek Sam clinched his teeth tightly as he stood with folded arms gazing down upon the scarred form. His face was white as marble, but his eyes glowed with an almost savage light.

"Ysabel—Lois—" faintly muttered the mine-owner, his head rolling from one side to the other, his lashless lids quivering, his fingers closing and unclosing.

"Peace, my friend!" muttered Sleek Sam, in deep tones as he sunk upon his knees beside the sufferer. "You are safe now—safe and among friends."

The lids suddenly unclosed and the bloodshot eyes stared up into that pale face, at first vacantly, wonderingly. But then the horrible truth seemed to flash across his brain, and with a choking cry, Randal Talfourd strove to rise, gasping:

"Ysabel—my wife! Let go—you will burn—oh!"

His head fell back with a hollow groan. His scarred body trembled and quivered with agony; but this was as nothing to the frightful torture which his mind experienced.

"They are safe," muttered Sleek Sam, one gently restraining hand upon his breast. "They will come to see you soon. If you will try and compose yourself, you shall see them—"

"You lie!" hoarsely gasped the mine-owner. "They are dead—murdered! I saw them burning in the flames—bound to the Fiery Cross—ashes to the Running Water—give me some! I am burning—burning up in the flames of hell!"

Paler than ever showed the face of the gambler. Redder than ever glowed his eyes. But his brows were heavily contracted, and his lips curled aside until they revealed his strong white teeth.

"Desp'farro—cowardly curl give me back my wife! Ysabel—my darling, my own—come!"

The first words grated out between clinched teeth, in tones of indescribable hatred and vengeance. The others louder, clearer, rising almost to a shriek as the tortured man summoned his dearly beloved wife.

And Sleek Sam started to his feet convulsively as a clear, ringing voice made answer:

"An' hyar she comes, boss, right eend up'ards, you bet!"

It was the voice of Hector Ajax Rivers!

CHAPTER XIX.

A MURDER MOST FOUL.

"Comin' as quick as the good Lawd 'll let us—you bet we jest air!" supplemented the cheery voice, and then there came the sounds of crackling undergrowth from the same direction. "Which I'm open fer to bet a mule-load o' ducats that the road-overseer o' this yer section hain't bin doin' of his jewty o' late days—durn the bresh an' briars!"

Bursting his way through the brush and coming from down the banks of the little river, Hector Ajax Rivers made his appearance, carrying in his arms the blackened form of Ysabel Talfourd, her garments still dripping water.

Grinning so genially that a huge red cavern seemed to unmask itself from behind that shaggy beard, the old man nodded to the right and to the left as he strode into the full glow of the firelight, now growing whiter as the new day dawned, and pausing there for a steady glance around.

"I hearn somebody squealin' out fer the madam, an' so I knowed it was safe to quit a-runnin' an' come back ag'in," he muttered apologetically, that broad grin materially lessened in strength and compass, as he stood the center of a silent group, where he had evidently expected to be received with cordiality, if not with enthusiasm. "I didn't know it'd be 'trudin' on a crowd what hedn't no room fer to spar', or mebbe I'd plugged up my years an' bin a-goin' till yit."

Still no answer or comment. Glances were flashed covertly from him to the face of Sleek Sam, who still stood in the attitude into which he started when that peculiar voice first came to his ears. And as his uneasy eyes followed the course of one of those glances, something like a smothered howl and curse broke from the lips of Hector Ajax Rivers.

"Good Lawd deliver us from all—Hello!"

Again the flame-scorched mine-owner tossed up his arms with a shuddering motion. Again his voice rung out with unnatural shrillness, pronouncing the name of his wife.

Until now, Ysabel Talfourd had hung across the arm of the old ragamuffin, limp and nerveless, seemingly a corpse. But at that wild, agony-shaken call, a convulsive thrill ran through her frame, and with a choking cry she lifted her head, staring wildly around, like one just wakening from some frightful dream. Only for an instant thus. Again the terribly tortured wretch cried aloud, and with her eyes thus guided, Ysabel Talfourd recognized her

husband, and springing from the grasp of the startled old man, she rushed forward and dropped on her knees beside the sufferer, sobbing and weeping.

Sleek Sam cast one glance in that direction then stepped swiftly in front of Hector Ajax, his eyes glowing like coals of living fire, his voice hard and stern:

"What was it you started to say, just now, when the lady cut you short by breaking away to join her husband?"

"I was so durn tickled fer to see you here, boss—"

"Careful, ool fellow!" harshly muttered Sleek Sam.

"Waal, then, I was so p'izen bad skeered at sight o' ye that I don't know what it was I wanted fer to say. Course I knowed it must be all right, sence the black-mugged critters was all gone a-whoopin', but fer all that the sight o' yer purty face brung back mem'ries o' las' night, when you jest everlastin'ly did go fer the ole man," grinned Hector.

"Once more I say, be careful!" muttered Sleek Sam, his brows drawing together in an ugly frown as he shook one fore-finger before the face of the tramp. "What brought you back here after the rest of the gang took to their heels?"

"The rest—oh, git out!" grinned Hector, after a momentary stare of amazement. "You wasn't one of 'em, was ye?"

"What do you mean, you hound?" growled the gambler, his face hotly flushing, his eyes glowing with a dangerous light, his white hands clinching tightly as he took a half-step toward the old man.

Hector Ajax fell back a pace, evidently holding himself in readiness to dodge an attack if made, dubiously scratching his head as he gazed anxiously into that threatening face.

"Durned ef I know! But it ain't that as is botherin' my pore ole cabeza hafe as much as what you mean, boss! Ef I could only give so much as a guess, I'd foller it out like a ole buck does a young doe!"

A hard, cold laugh parted those thin lips at this.

"You mean you would lie yourself out of the scrape?"

"I jest would, ef it showed up a shorter cut than the plain truth did," grinned the model tramp.

"Come!" with an impatient stamp of the foot. "Enough of this nonsense. Where did you find the lady? How came you to bring her back? Speak out, and to the point, if you are wise."

"I brung her back, 'cause I tuck her away in the fust place," laughed Hector Ajax, but with an uneasy air.

"Indeed!" was the swift comment. "You acknowledge being one of the gang that stole her away from town, then?"

"No I don't!" with energy. "I tuck her away from them black-faced devils which was toasin' her an' him in a bunch on a sort o' cross, jest afore you come up."

"Indeed!" sneered the gambler, with anything but a pleasant smile playing about his lips. "A hero in rags! Pray tell us how you managed to perform this heroic exploit."

"Now you're pokin' fun onto me with a shovel, an' durned ef it's treatin' the ole man white, it ain't!"

"Prove that you are white, and matters will mend," swiftly uttered Sleek Sam. "There has been black work going on here, and what we want is to get at the bottom facts of the case. You may be all right—I don't say you are not—but you are found in suspicious company, and have only yourself, or your bad luck, to blame for what happens."

"You say you rescued the lady; if you can prove that, it will go far to quiet our suspicions. It was an act of great daring—"

"Then you see'd me do it!" eagerly interrupted Hector.

"I saw the act performed, true; whether or no you were the principal actor, remains to be proven."

Hector grinned with more ease than usual, as he said:

"I think I hearn somethin' bu'stin' loose, jest after I made the break, but I was too 'tarnally bad skeered fer to stop to see who it was or what was comin'. Fact is, boss, as I hev hed to 'knowledge more'n once sence I struck this wooden kentry, I'm the durnedest coward you ever see! I kin hear myself blush as I say it, but the truth is mighty, an' will come out strong as the smell of a too-ripe aig—it will so!"

"To the point, man!" sternly muttered Sleek Sam.

"You know how I lit out o' the wilderness, when you—all jumped onto the old man, back thar las' night? Waal, I was so monstrous bad skeered that I didn't stop huntin' my hole till I run chuck up ag'inst them 'tarnal black-mugs, right here. An' thar I laid, jest a-shakin' all over like I had the wust 'scription o' ager, ontel I see that slapadacious woman-critter up an' sling herself right ker-splunt into the fire. Then I was skeered, fer all that's out! An' I sot out fer to hunt my hole, when durned ef I didn't take the wrong skoot an' run smack-up

ag'inst her! She stuck to me or I stuck to her; which it is, I'll never tell. An' over we both went into the drink!"

"I div' an' I swum an' I scrambled over the riffles wuss than any mush-rat with a tappin' snorkle fast to its rudder, ontel I was clean tuckered out. Then I made for the timmer, an' was a-layin' thar onder a bush, when I hearn you-all up here. I tuck the pore madam, fer I was skeered to leave her ahind, as she sorter made comp'ny fer me, an' crawled up this-a-way. I hearn the man call out fer her, an' out I come—"

"And down you go!" cried Sleek Sam.

Unheard, unsuspected by the tramp, a motion of the gambler's hand had caused two of the men to steal up behind the voluble speaker, and as he uttered that stern cry, Hector Ajax went down beneath a heavy blow from the butt of a revolver.

"Tie him up and take away his tools," coldly uttered Sleek Sam. "The cunning devil lied cleverly, but I held the key to the truth in my own hands. He tried to play the trick once too often for his own good health."

"You think, then, boss, that he was one o' the gang?"

"I know he was. You shall be given the proof in good time, never fear. Truss him up securely."

Sleek Sam turned away, pausing for a moment to gaze upon man and wife as they lay on the grass in the first rays of the rising sun. Ysabel, herself painfully scorched, was holding the head of her husband upon her bare arm, not daring to lift it clear of the ground. She was partly leaning over him, singing in low, gentle tones, as a mother tries to soothe a fretful babe. Scalding tears were flowing from the bloodshot eyes of the mine-owner, for he saw that his wife was out of her mind. Terrible though his sufferings in body must have been, not a moan escaped his lips, not a tremor crept over his form, lest it should give his wife more pain.

Little wonder that Sleek Sam turned abruptly away from that pitiful sight.

"Some of you arrange litters to carry those poor creatures on," he said, his voice strangely hard and forced. "We must get them to town, where they can receive better care than we are able to give."

He turned abruptly away, as his men set to work, and the litters, made by fastening blankets between long and limber poles, were nearly completed when he again appeared.

"I say, boss!"

The voice came from where the tramp was lying, and the peculiar notes could not be easily mistaken.

Sleek Sam stepped to the spot, his white face cold and stern.

"I say, ain't you all playin' it rather low down onto a pore ole cuss like me!" whined Hector Ajax. "What hev I done fer to git binged around like I never cost nothin'. What hurt hev I ever done to you-all? That's what gits me!"

"You infernal, cold-blooded scoundrel!" grated Sleek Sam, his eyes glowing redly. "You can lie there and ask me such an impudent—Bah! After this night's work, I need feel surprised at nothing you may attempt."

"Good Lawd!" muttered Hector, with a wry grimace, which was not all pretense. "An' I'm as bad as all that!"

"How bad, it would puzzle the devil himself to explain," was the curt retort. "But you have played your last trick—and lost! I know who you are. I know all that you have done and tried to do this night. I know that only for you and your devilish arts, yonder gentleman and lady would now be safe with their daughter, unharmed or—"

"You lie in your throat when you utter such a fiendish charge against me!" cried the prisoner, his voice and manner of speech undergoing a startling and complete change.

With a hard, metallic laugh, Sleek Sam signaled out two of his men, and bidding them follow, led them to where the wounded black-face lay breathing heavily. At another sign from him, they stooped and picked up the wounded man, carrying him over to where Hector Ajax Rivers lay helplessly bound.

"Lift our honest friend up so that this dying wretch can see his face," spoke Sleek Sam, standing by with folded arms. "Look at him well, fellow, and then speak the truth as you hope to be left to die in peace, instead of having your neck stretched by a stout rope. Did you ever see him before? Do you know him? Did you and your mates ever have any dealings with him? What part, if any, did he play in this scene of torture?"

The wounded black-face gazed at the prisoner, then, in sentences which were broken by frequent gasps and pauses, which need not be reproduced in this connection, made answer:

"I do know him. He is the chief of the band to which I belong, though he has been playing a part. It was by his orders that we attacked Randal Talfourd last night. It was his hand that changed the cartridges in his pistols for empty shells. Acting strictly according to his orders, we kidnapped the family, to satisfy an

old grudge of his. What that was, I don't know. It was something that brought Randal Talfourd beneath the ban of the society of which I am a member, and that man a high official."

"You lie, dog!" cried the prisoner, struggling furiously to burst his bonds. "It is all false as—"

At a gesture from Sleek Sam, he was pounced upon and a stout cloth bound around his lips, effectually checking his mad outburst. Then the wounded black-face went on:

"He wished to get the man out of the way. He had some object in sparing the woman, for the time being; I know not what. I only acted on the orders given me, with the rest."

"I would not say this much, only he has been first to break his sacred vows. He shot me down like a dog—"

A hard laugh from Sleek Sam cut him short.

"Don't wrong him by telling more than the simple truth, old fellow. I fired the shot that tumbled you over. He burnt powder freely enough, but his lead went wild, purposely, no doubt, since he intended only a sham rescue."

A choking cry escaped the lips of the witness.

"He did not—then I take it all back! I have lied from beginning to end! I know him not! He is innocent!"

"Too late, my good man," laughed Sleek Sam, mockingly. "I prefer to believe your first evidence. Men, you have heard? What shall be done with the satanic rascal!"

There was but one cry—the cry for blood! And a burly man leaped to the side of the prisoner, casting the noose of a lasso around his throat, crying loudly:

"I claim the right to hang the cuss, sense pore Tomaso ain't here to turn him off! Lift him up lads! All together!"

"Not here," muttered Sleek Sam, with a glance toward the insane woman. "She mustn't see! Hang him over yonder, a bit!"

CHAPTER XX.

LETTING THE MASK DROP.

HECTOR AJAX RIVERS was given no chance to appeal from the decision of the "kaugaroo court," as it might with justice be termed. Bound and gagged, he was dragged away with the hangman's noose around his neck, but even then the habit of close observation which is part of a detective's business, did not entirely desert him, and he knew that the burly ruffian who so eagerly demanded the right to serve as executioner, had not formed one of the rescuing party as led by Sleek Sam!

There was still another discovery which he had made during those last few minutes, the possibility of which he had not so much as suspected until he lay helpless before the gambler, who then let drop the cunning mask which he had habitually wore. A discovery for which he would gladly have given a finger—but what avail was it to him now?

"You kinder got the best o' me, back yender," grinned the volunteer hangman as the doomed man was forced along to a bit of timber some little distance from the scene of the torture. "You raked the persimmons that time, but I reckon it's my turn at the pole jest now. I'll treat ye mon'sous good, ef only fer the satisfaction o' my mate Mexican Tom, who is sorter onto the sick-list, 'long o' that cussed ram-head o' yourn!"

It was indeed Pueblo Dave, but no longer wearing the black mask as when he was foremost in the torture of Randal Talfourd. Surely Sleek Sam must be aware that the burly ruffian was a recent addition to his party of rescuers? And if so, what a prospect of bewildering, complicated scheming and successful rascality was opened up thereby!

A tree was reached which Pueblo Dave pronounced satisfactory, being out of sight of the spot where Ysabel Talfourd still bent over her husband, crooning her lullaby. The free end of the lasso was cast over a horizontal limb, and the men ranged themselves along the line in readiness to haul away.

"Give us time to make it all ship-shape an' Bristol fashion, mates," said Pueblo Dave, with a facetious grin as he stood with his hand on the shoulder of the doomed man. "I ain't so hefty as I mought be on the pious lay, but fer want of a better preacher-man, I reckon I kin wade through without gittin' in over my head."

"My dearly beloved brother-ah!" he intoned through his nose, greatly to the admiration of his fellows. "Let us speak our little piece, afore we go any furdher-ah!"

Bowing his head in mock reverence, Pueblo Dave hurriedly whispered in tones that reached the ears of the prisoner only:

"Es you're a dying man, speak the truth, sense it can't make matters no wuss fer ye. Did you shoot Perico Garguelez, or was it the boss, Sleek Sam? Ef you done it, nod your head; ef the boss, shake—but do it white!"

The eyes of the prisoner glanced swiftly around. He saw that there was no earthly hope for him, and like a brave, true man, he resolved that he would not die with even an im-

plied lie upon his head. And boldly meeting that burning gaze, he deliberately nodded his head in the affirmative.

"That settles it, then!" with a long breath.

"Hurry up and get it over with, unless you want the cap'ain stirring us up with a sharp stick!" impatiently cried one of the men at the rope.

"Keep your shirt on, mate, an' never hurry the percession afore the corpse is dumped out. The boss giv' me the lead in this little job, an' I ain't goin' fer to slight it. One more spurt o' gospel, an' I reckon the pilgrim 'll be all ready fer a flyin' jump over the golden gutter-ah!"

Laughingly the men looked on while Pueblo Dave resumed his burlesque performance, closing it with a mock blessing on the head of the doomed man. Then—away they walked with the rope, and without a struggle or quiver of his limbs, Hector Ajax Rivers was drawn up from the earth!

"Hitch the rope, an' let the pesky critter swing fer buzzard bait!" grinned Pueblo Dave. "Ef Mexican Tom was only here fer to take in the circus too!"

Meanwhile Sleek Sam had not been idle.

His first impulse led him a few steps toward the scene of the hanging, but then he paused, hesitated for an instant, finally turning on his heel and passing over to where the wounded black-face still lay, moaning, gasping in agony.

Though exceedingly painful, his wound was not necessarily a fatal one, as Sleek Sam was sufficiently experienced to see. Stooping over the wounded wretch, he muttered sternly:

"Stop your howling, curse you! You are disturbing the lady with your racket. Steady, now!" and apparently without feeling the dead weight, he raised the man in his arms and strode away through the bushes, depositing him in the same spot where he had been first discovered.

"You said you would save me!" gasped the black-face. "By your oath as a brother, I call upon you fer— Ah!"

Sleek Sam stooped suddenly and threw all of his weight upon the haft of a long knife, the blade of which sunk deep to the heart of the wounded man. His left hand dropped over the lips of his victim, but a sudden twist of the neck foiled him, and a wild, yell of mingled pain and horror escaped the death-stricken black-face.

Swift as thought the fatal knife was jerked from the wound and with the same motion cast far away into the river as Sleek Sam drew himself erect, folding his arms, gazing down upon the one whom he had so fiendishly murdered.

That wild shriek drew the men from the hanging scene, but as they came rushing up, weapons in hand, Sleek Sam stepped from the bushes where he had just added one more merciless deed to the heavy account placed against his name, his face calm, his lips smiling, his voice cool and steady:

"You've made a clean job of it, I hope, Dan!"

"We hung him up to dry, an' Pueblo Dave's watchin' him do the high kickin' act, so he kin kerry the news straight to Mexican Tom. But we thort we hearn a yelp—"

"Possibly you did," was the off-hand interruption, as the fellow stammered a little before that cool gaze. "The fellow we captured was groaning and whining so that I feared he would disturb the poor lady, yonder, and so I carried him back to the spot where you found him. I asked him a few more questions, and as he choked, I lfted his head to give him a drop of whisky. It was too late. He let out that yell, and was over the range before I could fairly realize it."

"It don't matter much, however. I learned all he had to tell, and his croaking of his own accord saves us a rope."

The explanation appeared to be perfectly satisfactory, and not one among the party made any move toward going to look upon the corpse. Why not? Could a cowardly murderer face his fellow-men with a calm, clear and honest look in face and eyes, like those worn by Samuel Oswald?

"And now to business once more!" cried Sleek Sam, with more fire in his tones and expression. "Our work is only part done, and the more time we lose, the harder it will prove. Are those litters prepared for use?"

An affirmative answer was given, and with ready obedience the men followed the instructions of their present chief.

Two of the steadiest animals were brought up and the ends of the long, limber poles fastened along their sides. It was intended to use two litters, one for each of the sufferers; but when they came to part them for that purpose, Ysabel Talfourd fought them with insane desperation, moaning and screaming with pitiful fierceness.

In vain Randal Talfourd spoke to her, trying to soothe her overwrought brain. She could not understand his meaning, and though the sound of his voice would apparently soothe her for the moment, she would break out fiercer than ever the instant Sleek Sam or any of his men attempted to part them.

"The one litter must serve for them both,

then," said Oswald, at length, resigning the idea. "It will be harder on my poor friend, but it would be still harder on the lady, to part them by force."

"I can stand it," muttered Talfourd, his voice faint and unsteady, great drops of agony starting out on his flame-scarred brow. "I think only of her—my poor, martyred darling!"

And thus, side by side, his head resting upon her arm, her face bent over his, that pitiful lullaby still coming in gentle notes from her lips, they were carried away.

Sleek Sam named the men who were to conduct the litter, both to guide the animals and to act as guard in case any of the routed black-faces should rally sufficiently from their panic to make an attempt at recovering their victims, and he stood silently beside his horse, watching them until they vanished from view through the crooked defile.

Then a sudden change came over him, his face settling down to a hard and unpleasant expression, while there was little of the smoothness in his tones that had helped to give him the sobriquet he bore.

"We are all right? The outsiders are all gone?"

"Jest the gang now, boss," promptly replied Dan.

"Good! I had to take some outsiders along, for their evidence may come in good play, before all is over, though I flatter myself that no single flaw can be found in the job, now that infernal tramp is pulling hemp!"

"Durned ef I see how he come in the row, anyhow!"

"Nor I. But in it he was, and came within an ace of ruining the whole business. I thought it might be an unlucky chance that led to his interference, last night, but after this second exploit—well, he can ply his trade of thief-taker in the other land!"

"You don't reckon he was smellin' after us?" hesitated Dan, with an uneasy light coming into his eyes.

"It looks like it! Why else was he here?"

"Then that young feller who tuck up fer him las' night at the Caboose! Mebbe he's in the same hunt?"

"No doubt of it! We'll have to look after the gentleman, as soon as we get our hands empty, or he may be kicking up a row. Curse the luck! Man never hatched up a prettier plot, or carried it out more neatly, if only that infernal curse had kept his fingers out of the pie!"

"He won't do no more burt, boss," said Pueblo Dave, with a savage grin, as he came up in time to overhear this speech.

"He is dead, then?"

"Too dead to skin! An'yit not quite; fer I'm goin' to take a bit o' his hide back to show pard Tomaso. He'll kick like a mule 'cause we sent the critter to glory, without lettin' him hev a chance to take a bite, but mebbe a little keepsake o' that sort'll smooth him down a little."

"You acted rashly in coming forward, Dave, as you did. If any of the outsiders happen to remember that you were not one of the party that left town on the trail, they may begin to smell a mice," a little sharply uttered Sleek Sam.

"I couldn't help it, boss," growled the burly ruffian. "When I see you goin' to elevate that pizen cuss, I hed fer to take a han' in ef it cost a leg!"

Sleek Sam was silenced if not satisfied by this argument, and let the matter drop.

"Well, we had better dispose of our friend over yonder. We can't spare time to dig a grave, and the water is deep enough to serve all purposes. Bring a couple of those blankets, and we'll get it over with."

With his own hands, Sleek Sam wrapped the corpse of the black-face up in the blankets. They were tied tightly, and a couple of heavy rocks secured to head and heels. Then the body was carried to the point of land on which the cross had been planted, and dropped into the water. A sullen splash, and one murder was concealed forever, as Sleek Sam told himself.

"Dave, when you get through with that carrion, plant it where it will rest safely until the last trump. Then hunt up Despilfarro, if he hasn't broken his neck running away, and explain how it all happened. Tell him that I will meet him at Dixie, according to agreement."

Sleek Sam leaped into the saddle, and followed by his comrades in evil, rode rapidly away on the trail of the litter bearers.

It was a silent cortege that wound through the valleys and hills. Only that pitiful lullaby, with an occasional groan which the flame-scarred mine-owner was unable to wholly suppress, despite his wonderful nerve.

The face of Sleek Sam looked haggard, now that the sun was shining brightly, and there were dark circles around his eyes. He was playing a desperate game for heavy stakes, and the unexpected complications which had entered into it gave him serious uneasiness. He could not help wondering who and what the seeming tramp really was. How much did he know? Was he working in partnership with the young

man who had so boldly interfered in his behalf the night before? And who was he?

His strong white teeth came together with a savage click as these thoughts flashed across his mind, and there was a dangerous glow in his eyes that boded ill for any person who attempted to cheat him out of his blood-earned prize.

When a few miles away from the spot where Handl Talfourd had been put to the torture, Sleek Sam spoke:

"That fellow we captured, before he died, made full confession to me. From him I learned where the girl was sent, and if we hope to rescue her, there's little time to waste. You will take these poor sufferers on to New Babylon by the easiest route, and put them under the care of a doctor as soon as you can. Send a man ahead with the news, so that all may be in readiness."

"Dan, Cat-eyes, Spindler and Moxon will come with me. We will be sufficient to do the work. The rest of you keep on to town. Watch out for snags, and if any one attempts to interfere with you, give them a hot reception. Good-by!"

Followed by the four men whom he had indicated, Sleek Sam turned abruptly to the left and rode away at a gallop.

He asked for no guide now, but pressed straight on toward the lone cabin with a celerity and decision that showed how thoroughly he was acquainted with the lay of the ground. Not a word passed between him and his followers, until the cabin came in sight, and they leaped from their saddles.

"The careless hounds!" snarled the Devil of the Mines, no longer thinking it necessary to wear his silken mask, where all were so thoroughly acquainted with his real character. "They're snoring away, instead of keeping watch! Look after my horse—I'll waken them, with a vengeance!"

His eyes glowing savagely, Sleek Sam silently approached the closed door, gathering his powers, and hurling his muscular shoulder against it with such force, that the barrier swung open with a crash. He leaped into the room, pistols in hand, but the fierce reprimand which trembled on his lips, suddenly changed to a cry of wondering horror, as he staggered back.

The four men left the horses and rushed forward, staring wildly at the terrible sight—two men lying upon their backs, their glassy eyes staring sightlessly up at the smoke-stained rafters. A discolored bullet-hole in the center of each forehead. A revolver clinched in each right hand.

"Hell and destruction!" snarled Sleek Sam, recovering from the shock, and glaring around him. "Where's the girl?"

Gone! Only the two corpses occupied the cabin, now that their living comrades had fallen back across the threshold.

For a few minutes Sleek Sam was like a madman, cursing and pouring forth a flood of blasphemy, while his men, fearing for their lives, shrunk away, and left him as much to himself as they possibly could, for in his insane rage, they knew he would not hesitate a moment in killing any or all of them, should his fury be turned in that direction.

It was the wisest course they could have followed. Left alone, Sleek Sam soon recovered something of his usual nerve and coolness. He saw that he was wasting valuable time.

Choking down his mad passions, he closely examined the two dead men. Each right hand held a revolver, with the hammers down upon freshly emptied shells. They faced each other. Each one had a single wound, so planted that they must have died almost instantly. There could be but one conclusion, when it was remembered that the men had long been enemies. They had quarreled, drew weapons, and killed each other.

But Lois Talfourd? Doubtless she had fled, after that double death; but how, and whither?

Cat-eyes searched for a trail, and finally found where the horses ridden by the dead men had gone off up the valley, and he declared that they were ridden.

"You can't tell that," sourly muttered Sleek Sam. "They may have strayed away of their own accord."

CHAPTER XXI.

ON A BLIND TRAIL.

THE withered-up looking Mexican gave his shoulders a peculiar shrug—one of those motions which sometimes possess the power of imparting much more than can be conveyed by the most nimble tongue in the same period of time.

"I pledge you my word as a trailer, *capitan*—"

A harsh, insulting laugh cut him short.

"Bah! we're not trying to throw dust in the eyes of a pack of half-drunken bummers, now, Sanchez. You could follow a blind trail through the night, as long as you had it thoroughly mapped out for you beforehand, but this is different. You haven't helped to lay this trail, and I doubt—"

Sleek Sam cut himself short with an impa-

tient laugh. He knew that, after all, he must depend mainly upon the withered-up old Mexican in this unexpected balk, and he could not help seeing how keenly he had touched the old tracker on his tenderest spot, by that scolding speech.

Until now, with a few minor exceptions, which really amounted to nothing in the long run, his bold and devilish scheming had turned out most favorably. This was the first decided balk, and his white teeth came together with a savage click as he reflected how dangerous it might prove, unless it could be turned into a triumph, like the rest.

For the death of the two men, he cared absolutely nothing so far as they were personally concerned. The future fortunes of his human tools were of as little value to him, when their work was once done, as the deck of cards through manipulation of which he had won a fortune, after the last hand was played.

But with their lives had vanished something of vastly more importance to him and his evil schemes. Perfect success depended on his keeping Lois Talfourd where he could put his hand upon her when necessary, to cast down forever, or raise up to his own level, as the circumstances might render best. She was gone—whither? Alone? Wandering at random, half-crazed by all she had been called upon to undergo since the sun went down in the west the last time? Or, had some friend, unknown to him, chanced upon her—but that could not be!

Beyond all reasonable doubt, Louis Montrose and old Stefano had renewed their feud, settling all scores by a double-shot that laid them both out in death. Everything went to prove that. And then, left unguarded, terrified out of her wits by the double tragedy, Lois Talfourd had fled through the night, either afoot or on one of the horses which her guards had ridden in bringing her to the lone cabin.

She must be found—at any cost. And now the grim joke which he had aided in playing on the honest portion of the rescuing party, recoiled upon himself with stinging force. If the old Mexican was only one tenth as smart a trailer as the credulous New Babylonians had been led to believe! Instead, he was but of ordinary skill, though the most accomplished tracker in the present company.

It was this reflection that caused Sleek Sam to cut his sneering comments short as he saw how little they were relished by the veteran, and in gentler tones he added:

"Do the best you can, Cat-eyes, to—"

"Surely you mean *Mole-eyes, capitan!*" muttered the fellow with a wry grin, an ugly look in his downcast eyes.

"Look out, or you'll resemble the mole in still another respect, my good fellow," sharply uttered the gambler, showing his teeth in an ominous smile. "You'll have your home under the turf, for good-and-all, if you dare to cross me while I am in my present humor! Get down to work. Show me that you know something of your pretended profession. Prove that those animals were ridden when they left this spot, and I may begin to believe in you. Down to work, and lively!"

Not a word spoke Sanchez in retort. Like the others of the party, he began to realize how dangerous was the mood of the man who commanded them, and bottling up his just resentment for a more favorable opportunity of getting even, he gave his reasons for deciding as he had.

"You can see, *senor*," he said, dryly, pointing with a skinny finger at the various signs. "Here the two animals were hitched, and they stood thus for some little time; the hoof-marks and the droppings prove that. Here the fastenings rubbed off the bark, and show that they were tied. If they had broken loose, the marks would be plainer, and almost certainly a portion of the neck-ropes would be left here. I find neither, and this is one reason why I say they were ridden away."

"Still another reason. Like all horses, after a long journey, they were hungry. They could not get their heads to the ground, and they gnawed the bark. If they had broken loose, or been set at liberty, they would have fallen to work at the grass. Instead of doing so, they strike off in a direct line up the valley. If frightened sufficiently to make them break loose and take to flight, the hoof-marks where hitched would have torn the ground more; and they would have dashed away at the top of their speed. Instead, they leave a trail that shows they went off at a moderate trot."

"If only one animal bore a rider, the other would have been left here, or, if taken along, the trails would not lie as they do, as far as I have followed them; exactly side by side. One would be irregular, now falling partly in the rear, now going a trifle wide, instead of passing along side by side, as closely and as evenly as though they were yoked together."

Despite his contrary humor, Sleek Sam was strongly impressed by the clear and consistent fashion in which Cat-eyes enumerated the proofs which would seem to fully confirm the statement he had so positively made at the outset.

"It sounds reasonable enough, the way you put it, Sanchez, and if you can make your state-

ment agree with the final results, be sure you'll never regret serving me this trip. Go on, and lift the trail as fast as you can, without risking over-running it."

With his wounded self-pride fully restored by this concession, Cat-eyes proceeded to follow the trail of the two animals, picking up the spoor at a rapid walk, and if he did not prove himself quite the phenomenon the uninitiated portion of the rescuing party had been led to believe, the past night, he showed himself a very fair tracker.

He gained and passed the point to which his preliminary examinations had carried him, and here, where the narrow valley was comparatively free from undergrowth, covered by a short carpet of tolerably fresh grass, he rapidly pointed out the sign which he had alluded to before leaving the cabin.

"You can see for yourself, *capitan*," he said, with a confident grin on his wrinkled, weather-beaten features. "Side by side, like a double team, and making a trail straight as a line run by an engineer! Their tracks show that they were trotting at about three-quarter speed when they passed this point. If they were not ridden, this would look different. If running away in fright, they would have left a straight trail, to-be-sure, but then the marks would indicate a run. If free and unfrightened, they would be straggling further apart, and stopping here and there to pick a mouthful."

"Then you think they are both ridden?"

"I am willing to wager my head on that, *capitan*."

That ugly glow came back into the eyes of the gambler at this positive assertion. Not alone! Who, then, was bearing her company? Could it be possible that—Ha!

He recalled how strangely the pretended tramp, Hector Ajax Rivers, had put in an appearance at the scene of the mine-owner's torture. He remembered how gallantly a young man, a perfect stranger to him, had sprung up to the aid of the old man when he was cornered in the Caboose. Could it be that those two men had witnessed the abduction and taken the trail in time to follow it to the end? If so, had the young man followed the black-faces detailed to guard Lois Talfourd? Could it be that his hand had fired those death-shots—Bah! it was impossible!

So he told himself, as the wild notion flashed across his excited brain, and he tried to banish the ugly and uncomfortable idea; but it would not down at his bidding. If true, it foreshadowed still other complications which might easily ruin all the black and deadly work his cunning hand and unscrupulous brain had thus far engineered.

With these disagreeable suspicions racking his teeming brain, Sleek Sam was moodily riding along in the rear of the old tracker, when an abrupt turn was given to his doubts.

A loud, angry shout came from the rear, and turning in his saddle, Sleek Sam beheld a horseman riding rapidly toward them, waving his hand excitedly. One glance, and he recognized the person. His eyes glittered, his teeth closed upon his lower lip and a short breath puffed through his distended nostrils. The face of the young man instantly faded away from his brain, to be replaced by another—that of the horseman who was trying to overtake them—Raymon Despilfarro!

"Where's the girl?" cried Despilfarro, angrily, as he came up, wrenching in his panting animal with a force that flung it fairly upon its haunches.

"You tell!" growled Sleek Sam, showing those white teeth and confronting the masked chief of the black-faces—masked no longer, save by a cloud of hot and bitter suspicions. "She was missing when I reached the cabin. What have you done with her? Where have you hidden her?"

"I?" cried the Spaniard, plainly amazed to find the odium so abruptly cast upon his own shoulders.

"Yes, you! What sort of racket are you trying to give me, anyway? Look out, my fine fellow!" and Sleek Sam shook his long white finger threateningly in the face of his suspected confederate. "You try to give me 'the cross' in this little job, and the whole earth won't be big enough to hold you alive! Mark what I say, for it's good as sworn to!"

Raymon Despilfarro stared incredulously into the angrily glowing face before him, flinching a little before that glittering eye, but it was not for long.

"I know nothing—I just came up, to find Luis and Stefano dead and the girl missing. I saw your trail, and recognized the track of your horse. I thought you were trying to cheat me, and followed. I saw you, and fancied you were taking her away."

Keenly Sleek Sam watched the speaker, and his angry suspicions faded to nothingness, for he saw that Raymon Despilfarro was speaking no more than the simple truth. Knowing him so thoroughly, a lie could not deceive him as it might other men. Tone, words and expression all carried conviction with them in this case. He must look further for the thief.

"We were both mistaken," he said, reaching

out his hand and grasping that of his confederate. "Like you, we found only the two dead men in the cabin. Cat-eyes says that the two horses whose tracks we are now following, were both ridden when they passed along here, and if so, then there must be a strange finger in our pie! We must find!"

A sharp cry from one of the men cut him short.

"Look yonder! That's one o' the critters now!"

Slowly appearing from around a point of shrubbery, came a saddled and bridled horse, feeding lazily as he moved along, its halter dragging the ground.

"Spread out and take the horse!" cried Sleek Sam.

He was promptly obeyed, and the animal was taken without much difficulty. Almost instantly Raymon Despilfarro recognized it as the one ridden by Luis Montero when they parted.

"Scatter and look for sign. They may be in hiding near here, and mustn't get away!" cried Sleek Sam, setting the example, leaping to the ground and hurrying along, weapons ready for instant use in case the necessity should arise.

For nearly an hour their search continued, without anything being discovered of the missing girl; but something else was found out, and there was an ugly look upon the face of the gambler when the party once more came together.

"So much for lending an ear to a conceited ass!" he snarled, flashing an ugly glance at the crestfallen tracker. "The girl was alone, as any fool might have known. She led the other horse, until it broke away from her, pulling her from the saddle. She bung on to her own animal, and remounting, kept on, letting the other horse go free!"

As he spoke, he pointed to the plainly imprinted tracks of a small foot in high-heeled shoes; they led a horse's track to a round boulder, where she evidently climbed into the saddle, then rode away in a straight line.

This, as well as the spot where a set of prancing hoofs had deeply scored the ground, as though pulling wildly at a leading rope, they all could see plainly enough, and no other inference could be drawn from them.

"I have lost too much valuable time already," said Sleek Sam, sourly, mounting his horse once more, and addressing Raymon Despilfarro. "You must investigate this part of the work. You know what may happen to us both if that girl gets among those who will believe her story and befriend her. See that this does not happen. Find her, alive or dead!"

"I'll do my best," replied Despilfarro.

"No man can do more. Follow the trail to the end, if you can. If you lose it, divide and each one make for a station along the road. If she comes there after you, secure her at all hazards. If she has come and gone, track her down, no matter where she goes or who is with her. *Kill if you must*, but on no consideration slacken your efforts until she is taken!"

Swiftly he spoke, his eyes glittering like those of an enraged snake; then, plying spurs savagely, he galloped away.

CHAPTER XXII.

TRYING TO GET OUT OF THE WILDERNESS.

WITH a sobbing, hysterical cry, Lois Talfourd leaped into the arms of her gallant lover, hiding her face upon his breast and trembling convulsively. The trials she had that night been forced to undergo had proven too much for her strength.

Bravely as she had faced the renegade American, unflinching from his dark and desperate threats when she felt that there was no human aid near at hand to preserve her from his mad violence, the moment she beheld a friendly face, her feverish strength of mind and body deserted her, and she could only sob her hysterical joy and thankfulness on the bosom of the young ranchero, whom a kindly Providence had guided to her rescue.

Nor is it any reproach to Willard Yorke to say that his brain, after the first wild transport, was exercised over far different matters than love and kisses. He knew that the two men who now lay silent in death before him had belonged in life to a formidable league of criminals; that sooner or later they would be missed, and the cause of their death investigated. And it went without saying that if the author of their undoing was discovered by them, his fate would not be held long in consideration.

With that decidedly uncomfortable feeling as of a fire-footed centipede, with a remarkably frigid icicle for a body, taking sprinting exercise up and down his spinal column (which one generally experiences when anticipating a shot or vicious blow from cover), Willard Yorke lifted the maiden clear of the floor and hastily retreated from the cabin, coming to a halt under cover where the shades were thickest.

Then, clasping Lois so tightly to his bosom that her hysterical sobs were almost stifled, the young ranchero stood and listened for a brief space in breathless suspense, to learn whether or no those pistol-shots had been heard by others, awakening sufficient curiosity to lead to an investigation. If so, there came no immediate

evidence, and then Willard Yorke turned his attention to soothing his loved one.

It was a difficult task, for the less acute her personal apprehensions, the more vividly did Lois Talfourd recall the perilous situation in which she had last seen her parents.

"My mother—father! Take me to them, Willard—take me to them! Those fiends in human shape are murdering them! I know it—I feel it in my heart! Willard, if you love me, take me to my poor parents!" she sobbed, clinging to him with hysterical violence, her lithe figure trembling like a storm-beaten bush.

Gently and patiently Yorke tried to soothe and quiet her. Though he had seen and heard enough that night to feel tolerably sure that it would be equivalent to cutting his own throat were he to carry out her wishes, he promised Lois that he would do all that lay in his power to restore her to the arms of her parents; and, with a slight reservation, he meant all that he said, too.

All this while, his brain was busily at work, viewing the situation from every point and weighing the chances both pro and con. Naturally shrewd and quick-witted, the peril which menaced his dearly beloved was quite sufficient to sharpen the faculties of the young ranchero, and by the time he had partially comforted Lois and restored something of her wonted composure, his course of action was fairly decided upon, so far as the first few steps were concerned.

"Lois, for the sake of all you hold dear, try and compose yourself," he urged, gently. "We are still in danger here, and must lose no more time than we can help. Others of the gang may even now be approaching, and if they discover us here, with those dead men lying in yonder, there will be more bloodshed."

"Oh, come—let us go—to father and mother!" gasped the poor girl, her fit of trembling renewing itself.

"We will—but first I must fix matters inside the shack so as to throw the bloodhounds off the scent. It must be done, darling, and you must remain here until I come back. You will be brave—you will not be afraid?"

He knew that she would, but he also knew that it could not be helped. The sight of the dead men would be still more agitating, and with gentle force he removed her clinging arms from around his neck, making her crouch down at the foot of the stunted tree, for the first time in all their acquaintance speaking to her with anything like sternness:

"Lois, you must obey! You must get the upper hand of this weakness, unless you wish ruin to overtake not only you and I, but your parents as well. Every moment wasted here, is one more chance taken from them. Promise me that you will not stir from this spot—that you will not suffer a single sound to escape your lips—until I return to you."

Meekly the girl yielded to his stronger will, crouching there, stifling her convulsive sobs. It was very hard for the young ranchero to tear himself away from the poor, half-distracted creature, and still more trying to speak so sternly to her, but he felt that necessity demanded such a course.

Hastily returning to the cabin, Willard Yorke placed the dead outlaws in position as afterward discovered by Sleek Sam, and taking the empty shell from his own pistol, he placed it in the revolver owned by Stefano, bending the already stiffening fingers around the polished butt.

Passing out, Yorke made sure that the two horses were still where he had seen them hitched, and then returned to the spot where he had left Lois Talfourd.

She arose when she heard his voice, and though he could feel her still trembling slightly, she seemed to have recovered in a great measure from her unreasoning terror.

"You are strong enough to ride, Lois?" he asked, a little doubtfully, as he led her toward the animals. "There is great danger in every minute we linger here, and—"

"Only take me to my dear parents, and I can endure anything! I can ride—let us lose no more time!"

There was a peculiar, feverish eagerness in her manner that gave Willard some uneasiness, for he felt that her powers were but fictitious, and liable to desert her at any moment; but realizing the value of time, he hesitated no longer.

Lifting her into the saddle of the horse once owned by Louis Montrose, retaining the neck rope in his own hand, Yorke mounted the other animal and headed up the valley.

He was wholly ignorant of the lay of the ground round about, as he had never been in that region before, but he believed he was capable of reaching New Babylon by means of a roundabout course. He dared not attempt to follow the back-trail, lest he should run upon some of the evil gang, and for the sake of Lois, any such encounter must be avoided, if possible. Never before had he felt such a deep responsibility resting upon his shoulders.

The peril of Randal and Ysabel Talfourd likewise troubled him. Aid in force should be dispatched with the least possible loss of time, and yet he felt that his first duty was owing to their

daughter. One whom he believed a good man and a true, was on their trail; to him they must be left for now.

With his brain so filled with plots and plans and conflicting emotions, Willard Yorke kept a close watch over his fair charge, whose strength of body, after all she had been called upon to undergo, he doubted; and it was well that he did so, for when barely a couple of miles had been left behind them, the fictitious strength suddenly failed her, and with a gasping cry, she would have dropped from the saddle, only for his strong and ready arm.

His sudden motion as he caught the fainting maiden when on the point of falling, frightened the horse, and with a loud snort it leaped aside, tugging violently at the halter which was wrapped around the young ranchero's wrist.

Unable to retain both, Yorke let the horse go, and the freed creature galloped away with a triumphant nicker.

The struggle seemed to awaken Lois and restore her failing powers, for she said, her voice quite steady:

"I am better, Willard. Let me down. I can stand while you catch the horse again."

Then it was that, like an inspiration, the ruse which was fated to most effectually throw dust into the keen eyes of their most dangerous enemy, occurred to the young ranchero.

Hastily he explained his meaning, and yielding to his superior judgment without a demur, Lois took the horse by the bridle, and led it to the rock pointed out by Yorke. From this boulder she was lifted in the arms of her lover, and once more they rode on up the valley.

While impatiently watching for a chance to leave the valley, and begin veering around toward New Babylon, Willard Yorke explained matters as well as he was able, to Lois, in his turn receiving an account of the abduction. Unfortunately, neither of them so much as suspected the real part which Sleek Sam was playing in that intricate drama.

Not long after having laid that false sign for those who might take their trail, Yorke managed to leave the valley, though the turn was not in the precise direction he could have wished. The way was rough and rocky, they passing over long stretches of ground where the hoofs of their doubly laden animal scarcely left a trace of its passage. Yorke made the most of these opportunities, and in addition encouraging his fair charge. These duties, coupled with its being night, and a totally strange region to the young man, surely are sufficient excuses for his losing all idea of the course he should follow, in order to reach New Babylon.

Long before the day began to dawn, the young ranchero was forced to acknowledge to himself that he had utterly lost himself, and knew not whether he was riding toward or directly away from the town he wished to reach.

Awakened from a sound slumber while lying out in the brush, having only a faint idea of where that hiding place was in the first place, then hurried off by his strange comrade, in mad chase of he knew not what, followed by the astounding discovery of his loved one's abduction, Yorke had taken absolutely no notice of the course followed after that. And thus it was, that now he had not the slightest idea of the direction in which New Babylon lay.

He retained sufficient control over himself, however, to keep this unpleasant discovery from Lois, and devoting more of his care to leaving a blind trail behind them; he still pressed on through the wilderness.

Anxiety for the future of her parents, enabled Lois to bear up against fatigue, and she seemed to draw fresh nerve and strength from the close embrace of her strong young lover. Once or twice, when he suggested a brief pause for rest, she urged him on with feverish energy.

At length, when the gray light in the east marked the dawning of a new day, Willard Yorke suddenly drew rein, bending his head in eager listening. Faint and indistinct, there came to his ears the sound of fire-arms, a number of reports so swiftly succeeding each other, that the echoes were blended into one long roll.

Thanks to his present position, on the crest of a considerable elevation, Yorke was enabled to note the direction from whence the sounds came with tolerable certainty, and though a suspicion of the actual truth flashed across his brain, he unhesitatingly urged his horse down the slope in that direction, resolved to satisfy all doubts as speedily as possible.

If Lois heard the sounds, she did not recognize them, and Willard Yorke was well satisfied to let her remain in ignorance for the time being.

On that clear, pure air, sounds travel far; especially in the early dawn, and as Yorke pressed on in the general course he had marked out, the day dawned, the sun arose, and the tragedy of the Fiery Cross was long over before he drew near to the spot from whence those pistol-shots came.

When feeling sure he was not far distant from the place he was seeking, Willard Yorke urged his horse up a steep but short slope, drawing rein and eagerly gazing around.

Worn out by the long journey, Lois had fallen into a gentle doze, and the checking of the horse did not fully awaken her. Yet Yorke instinctively placed one hand before her eyes to shut out the scene which was so suddenly revealed.

He saw the smoldering remains of a fire; he caught a fleeting glimpse of a number of horsemen just vanishing into a bush-studded hollow, their heads turned almost directly from him. And something warned him that he was gazing after the same evil band which had stolen away the Talfourd family!

As he gazed keenly around and over the little glade, he felt almost sure that he caught a glimpse of a man on foot remaining behind, and with his heart throbbing rapidly, he bowed his head low down and cautiously backed his horse from the eminence, lest the discovery should be mutual.

Re-treating down the hill, he gently roused up Lois, and lowering her to the ground, he dismounted.

"I am not certain, dear, but I believe we are drawing near our destination," he said, softly, smoothing her hair with a gentle hand. "You will not be afraid to remain here alone for a few minutes, while I investigate?"

"Not if you think it best, Willard," was her brave reply.

"I do, or I would not leave you, even for a moment, dear."

With one brief kiss, the young ranchero stole silently away, looking at his pistols as soon as hidden from her view, then hastening on to discover—what?

The question was soon answered. Ten minutes later, he was peering out upon a man kneeling beside another with bared knife. And that other, lying motionless on the ground, was the tramp-detective, Hector Ajax Rivers!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DEVIL OF THE MINES AT HOME.

FOR a young mining-town, wholly dependent upon the mineral out put for its growth and prosperity, Dixie wore an appearance of unusual neatness and solidity. Two years ago the spot where the lively little town now nestled at the foot of the rocky hills, was a dreary enough looking desert, into which none save a mineral-mad prospector would have thought of pressing, much less of one day building there a city of the desert.

To-day, just one month subsequent to the peculiar events which occurred in and around New Babylon, the picture was a vastly different one from that on which the weary eyes of Randal Talfourd rested when he built his first camp among the grim and frowning rocks.

At least a hundred houses were scattered along the foot of the hills, ranging all the way from a rough-board shack to a two-story frame building. In different directions could be seen the dingy sheds and tall stacks of two huge quartz-mills, their mighty stamps keeping up their ponderous strokes both day and night. There, rough and insignificant-looking, but for all that one of the biggest "bonanzas" of the day, could be seen the saw-mill which reached the "new strike" almost as soon as the first mule-loads of whisky.

Not an unpleasant prospect, by any means, decided at least one observer, as he gazed blandly over the bustling little town and felt that the best part of it was now paying him a rich tribute.

"A man would be a bloody idiot to want any softer snap than just this!" he muttered, with a wide sweep of the white and shapely hand that held his fragrant cigar.

And not even his worst enemy would ever think of calling Samuel Oswald an idiot.

Sleek Sam it was, slowly pacing the covered verandah in front of the square, two-story building that overlooked the whole town from its perch on the rounded knoll at the base of the foot-hills. In apple pie order looked the worthy gambler. His clothes were glossy and unwrinkled, black as the wing of raven. His linen snowy white and polished as only a patient and skillful Chinaman can do it. His clean-shorn face handsome, smooth, bland as ever. The picture of a happy, prospering, honest, whole-souled gentleman.

The last rays of the declining sun that pleasant summer evening, never shone on a more comfortable-looking gentleman than Sleek Sam. Almost complete success had rewarded his bold scheming for a fortune, and he knew that he had only to reach out his hand and close it upon a golden prize sufficient to keep him in comfort for the remainder of his days.

"But I'd be a precious fool to let go my grip just now," he muttered, barely above his breath as he paced gently along the shaded veranda and back again. "I thought of doing so at first—of taking what I could get on the jump, and let it go at that; but now that the current is all in my favor—"

He ceased abruptly both in soliloquy and walk, his brows slightly contracting as he caught sight of a horseman riding rapidly toward the town. Deeper grew the frown and those strong white teeth came together with an ugly click as he saw the horseman pass by the

turn he should have taken were his destination that of an ordinary traveler, and head his horse straight for the large building.

"Him it is!" and somehow Samuel Oswald seemed an entirely different personage from the bland, courteous, and gentle-appearing person whom we have been watching. "He has been so long I began to hope the devil had claimed his own ere this!"

But there was only frank and open-hearted pleasure to be seen in face or read in tones as Sleek Sam bade Raymon Despilfarro welcome.

"Light, old fellow! Give your nag to Dan, and come in! It's a sight for sore eyes to see your figurehead once more! Do you know, I had serious thought of advertising for you, or sending out a sheriff with a search-warrant—ha! ha!"

Dan'el took charge of the horse, and Despilfarro followed his frank and hearty host indoors. Worn and weary from his long and toilsome journey, uncertain how he would be received by his confederate, the Spaniard gave an audible sigh of relief at his cordial reception.

Seated in a cosy room, with liquor and cigars on the table between them, the two men gazed steadily into each other's eyes. In those of the Spaniard was doubt and incertitude; but keen as were his perceptions, Raymon Despilfarro could not pierce the depths of those blue orbs, so gentle, bland and honest as they certainly seemed to be.

"My dear fellow, are you sure you are comfortable?" asked Oswald, leaning lazily back in his chair, after that long and steady meeting of eyes.

"It is like a glimpse of heaven after purgatory!" was the somewhat emphatic reply, as Despilfarro emptied his glass and lit a cigar.

"Then, if you would be so kind, I am ready to listen to your report," softly uttered Sleek Sam, from behind a cloud of blue and fragrant smoke.

"It can be put into one word—failure!"

"You don't say?" in a tone of gentle surprise. "But, if it will not give you too much trouble, would you mind going a little more into details? I am sorry to persist—"

The Spaniard flung out one hand impatiently.

"I may possibly see where you made your first false step if I hear all your moves, my dear fellow. Will you oblige?"

"You know I have no option, if you command me; but for all that, drop your honeyed cant while we are alone. It makes me sick at the stomach!" irritably muttered Despilfarro.

"Just as you prefer," was the quiet comment. "What steps did you take after I left you that day? Why have you been so long without reporting? What became of the girl?"

"Satan only knows; I don't!" with a sullen scowl, that turned the handsome face into that of a fiend. "I followed your instructions to the very letter. We followed the trail of that horse until it was lost for good and all—"

"I said the old fool should be named Mole-eyes!"

"Sanchez did his best, like the rest of us," was the sullen comment. "When the trail was certainly lost beyond all hope of recovery, I sent the man Dan to tell you, and to make sure the girl did not return to New Babylon. We divided and struck out for the railway. We visited each station within possible reach of her wanderings, but could find out nothing for certain. I did strike what I believed might possibly turn out a clue, and followed it clear to Denver, only to lose it there. In one word, we failed to find anything of the girl, though I, for one, have not had a single sound night's rest since we parted a month ago. And there you have it all."

"You are certain the lady never reached and took a train, then?" suavely asked Sleek Sam, gazing at the Spaniard through half-closed eyes, but betraying wondrously little curiosity where so much appeared to depend upon the answer.

"I could take my oath that she never escaped that way."

"Of course you have formed some sort of a theory to account for her complete vanishment?"

Something in that languid, affected tone touched Raymon Despilfarro most unpleasantly, but he dared not again revolt against the manner of his present host. The more intimately he came to know the gambler the more he learned to dread his smooth, suave mood, for past experience told him it covered perils all the more to be shunned because they were hidden.

"There can be but one solution as I see."

"And that one? My dear fellow, pray oil that tongue of yours a trifle, if it will not work freely without. You and I have long passed the stage of the game when it might be advantageous to either to conceal our hands. Surely you have nothing to be ashamed of, even if you have failed where another, more lucky—for I feel that none could be more faithful or well-intentioned—might have succeeded. Once more—what is the theory you have formed concerning the mysterious disappearance of Miss Lois Talfourd?"

"I can account for it after but one fashion," was the slow response. "You know—I believe I told you at the time—that I put her under charge of two of my best men, but between whom there was a quarrel of old standing. They were rival candidates for election, and Luis Montero gained the office. Stefano seemed to think there had been foul play and trickery, which carried the day in his rival's favor."

"Of course there is some close connection between this and your theory, but—would you mind pointing out the link? I confess that I am all at sea!" drawled Sleek Sam, politely enough as to words, but with a poorly hidden insolence in his tones and look that stung the Spaniard like a slap in the face; all the more because there was absolutely no handle given him to grasp the insult by.

"Your prosperity has dulled your wits, I fear, my friend," he said, showing his teeth in a half-defiant smile. "But I will try my poor best to make you comprehend."

"You told me that all our future hopes hung on the careful keeping of the girl. You directed me to send her under guard to the cabin where you were to make your appearance in due time and gallantly rescue her, at the risk of your life."

"Well, I chose two trusty men, as I said. I knew how powerful is the temptation presented by a young and lovely maiden, among men of our caliber. If I sent two boon companions, they might do too much talking and thinking for the good of the young lady. Two men, at daggers points with each other, while they would not neglect their charge, would spend their time in watching each other, looking for a flaw by means of which they might ruin a rival at headquarters. Now can you comprehend my meaning?"

"It is still rather misty, but I believe I can guess at your motives. Let that point go, and give me your theory, since you say you have formed one."

"You have not forgotten how you found the two dead men at the cabin? Each was killed by a single shot. They had been facing each other. One shell in each pistol was empty, recently discharged, and a finger was on each trigger."

"Remembering all this, there is only one solution. The two men got to quarreling, and shot each other. At such close quarters, there was no need for a second shot. Both were pure game, and so quick on the draw, that lightning itself could not cause death swift enough to prevent either from firing one shot. They both fell dead at the same instant, and the girl, terrified by the tragedy, fled from the cabin."

"She saw the horses, and thinking only of flight, or of joining her parents, she mounted and rode away, in her confusion, or bewildered by the night, taking a course up instead of down the valley."

"If any person had come to her assistance, that stray horse would not have been found, or if found, we would have discovered tracks, other than those made by the girl. If not tracks, then there would have been some attempt to catch the stray horse, by the other rider. There was none. After the girl led her animal to the rock and mounted it again, the single track led off straight up the valley for more than a mile, when it turned into a ravine leading to the left hand."

"Closely reasoned, and doubtless true as gospel writ, as far as it goes," commented Sleek Sam, still with that tantalizing smile and drawling tone. "And the ultimate fate of the young lady, since you feel confident she never reached the railroad?"

"I believe she was lost from the very outset. She could have had no knowledge of her location. She wandered through the hills and gorges until her strength failed her. Then, sick and terrified, starving, she ended in some remote spot where her bones will doubtless lie until the crack of doom!"

"You believe she starved to death, then?"

"What else can I think?" a little tartly. "For the last month I have been searching for her, night and day—"

"Hundreds of miles away from where the last sign was discovered!" interposed Sleek Sam, with an irritating laugh. "My dear friend, I hate to say it, but the fact is, you have made a complete and most egregious ass of yourself!"

With an angry curse, Despilfarro pushed his chair back and clapped a band to the butt of a pistol; but cool and calm as ever, Sleek Sam lazily waved his white hand, saying:

"Don't rise on my account, my dear sir, I beg of you! And if that pistol incommodes you in the least, you have my permission to lay it aside while you remain here."

"You insult me—"

"The truth should never insult, especially when it comes from the lips of a bosom friend, old fellow. Still, if that little pet name pricked you too sharply, please consider it withdrawn and amply apologized for. Can I say more?"

Sulkily Despilfarro resumed his former position, filling his glass with a band that still trembled with anger.

"Your theory is an exceedingly ingenious

one, and well fortified by seeming facts, but for all that, my dear fellow, it is as far removed from the truth as black is from white!"

"Perhaps you can give a better explanation?" sourly.

"Give—or show it, if you prefer."

"What do you mean by *show it*?"

"Just this: Miss Lois Talfourd did not starve to death in the hills. She made her escape, and sought me out. I served her and hers so admirably that the little lady showed her intense gratitude by marrying me," blandly smiled Sleek Sam.

CHAPTER XXIV.

REFRESHING AN IMPAIRED MEMORY.

RAYMON DESPILFARRO stared at the speaker in wide-eyed and open-mouthed amazement. Surely his hearing had deceived him, or else this was a very clumsy joke which Sleek Sam was trying to play off on him!

"Do you take me for an infernal fool?" he growled, with the vicious side-glance characteristic of a surly cur which longs yet fears to make its teeth meet in the flesh of an enemy.

Sleek Sam smiled more blandly than ever, until the pure cream of human kindness and benevolence seemed to exude from every pore. A gentle wave of his white hand aided the voice:

"Facts and opinions are stubborn things, my boy, and, with your permission, we will not follow that question up too closely at present. But I may ask, why are you so astonished by the mere idea of my marrying Miss Lois Talfourd?"

"You ask that—after all you have done to her parents? Bah! I'm worse than an ass for paying any attention to your silly jokes. Go on! You can talk and I'll drink and smoke!" uttered the Spaniard, to whom the strong liquor which he had sampled so generously, was clearly giving an unusual supply of Dutch courage.

"You are still skeptical?" drawled Sleek Sam, arching his eyebrows as he gazed across the table at his confederate.

"Oh, no! I'm ready to swallow anything you throw at me."

"So kind!" smiled Sleek Sam, with a languid bow, adding: "Will you oblige me by touching that bell by your elbow?"

There was a silver call-bell—strange article to be discovered in a rough mining-camp!—on the table, and Despilfarro struck it sharply in obedience to that silken request, at the same time hitching his chair around so as to enable him to command a view of all who might enter, as well as to keep his eye on his host.

"You are still incredulous, though your politeness is so exquisite that you struggle nobly to conceal your doubts. Between friends and allies there should be no concealments, and acting on this principle, I am about to introduce you to my young and charming bride, and so—enter, my precious!"

A gentle tap at the closed door called forth this soft summons, and the black eyes of Raymon Despilfarro opened widely and filled with utter amazement as the door opened, and a trim, neatly-dressed figure entered the room.

"Don Raymon Despilfarro, my wife!" said Sleek Sam, rising and bowing low as his white hand supplemented the introduction. "Lois, my dear, this is one of our most valued friends, who has kindly consented to give us a few days of his most valuable time. Please see that a bed is prepared for him."

The lady bowed, with a bright smile. Despilfarro, dimly conscious of the fact that he was making a boorish exhibition of himself, bowed low over the little hand, mumbling something he could not have told what, sinking back into his chair as the woman bowed and retired, closing the door behind her.

"Well?" softly uttered Sleek Sam, that irritating smile rippling over his smooth, massive features.

"It is not well!" cried the Spaniard, sharply, casting off the half-stupor that had fettered him since his first glance at the face of the young woman.

"Indeed! And may I ask why it is not well?"

"Look here, Sleek Sam!" grated Despilfarro, leaning across the table, his hands clinching tightly, his dark eyes aglow. "What sort of a game are you trying to put up, anyhow? Are you trying to come the double over me? If so—"

"My dear fellow," and there was an expression of pained surprise in the face of Sleek Sam as he spoke. "Have you suddenly taken leave of your senses? If I thought not—if I could for one moment bring myself to believe you were in earnest in charging me with unfair dealing—I'd send you to Tophet in a holy minute."

Sharp and viciously came the last words, and for one fleeting second, the face of Sleek Sam was shown without its customary mask. Warned, Despilfarro sunk back into his seat, with a forced laugh, saying:

"As I need rest before traveling further, suppose we call a truce! As for the lady, if you are satisfied, I should be."

"I felt sure you would recognize her—"

"As your wife, since you introduced her as such—certainly; but as Miss Lois Talfourd—decidedly not!" retorted Despilfarro with slow decision. "There is a strong resemblance between the two, if not scrutinized too carefully, that I admit; but a second look shows the difference too plainly to doubt. So, once more—what kind of a game are you playing?"

More blandly than ever smiled Sleek Sam, though there was a kindling fire in his benevolent eyes as he spoke:

"Strange! Your memory certainly must be getting impaired, my dear fellow. Not Miss Lois Talfourd? Yet she can show her certificate of birth and of baptism. And she has in her possession, the last will and testament of her late lamented father, Randal Talfourd, in which she is named as his heiress—the sole legatee, now that her unfortunate mother 'is also up the golden stairs. Strange, indeed, that you should fail to recognize her. Very, very strange!"

In that pensive smile as it played around the red lips of the gambler, was blended a gentle bewilderment. His finely formed head shook slowly to and fro, his brows contracting just a trifle, as his half-closed eyes darted a keen glance into the dark face of his co-conspirator.

With a short, hard laugh, Raymon Despilfarro refilled his glass and holding it up between him and the dim light which came through the open window, he muttered:

"The sun has set, and this room rather dark. Then, too, you must remember I was taken completely by surprise. I had buried the lady quite to my satisfaction, and one does not readily believe in the resurrection of the dead. Still, my eyesight and memory may improve before we meet again, provided—"

"Well?" asked Sleek Sam, as his companion paused abruptly.

"She is sole heiress to the Lost Cause and other valuable property owned in life by Randal Talfourd. You are her husband, and consequently her business manager. But poor me—thousand curses on my memory! It surely is failing me!"

"It does appear to be most woefully impaired," laughed Sleek Sam, lighting a fresh cigar and settling back more comfortably in his easy-chair. "You are my partner, and share equally in the profits, as fully agreed upon before we entered for the Talfourd stakes. Is that satisfactory?"

"Entirely so," warmly replied the Spaniard. "I feel my memory so strengthened that I don't believe I'd find any difficulty in swearing to the identity of the lady, if put on the witness stand in open court."

"There is little probability of things ever coming to such a pass, unless, indeed, another claimant should happen to put in an appearance."

"Which will never happen in this world! But now—how did it all come about, anyhow?" curiously asked Despilfarro.

"Of course you have not forgotten how we came to enter into partnership? We were both nosing along the same trail, and for fear the rich quarry might take the alarm, should we get to fighting to decide which one had the best right to run him down, we concluded to join hands and share with each other when the prize was fairly won. At the best, it was a ticklish piece of work, and all of our forces were needed to carry it through to complete success. You admit that much?"

Despilfarro nodded, and Sleek Sam continued:

"Luckily we both belonged to the same order, with which our quarry had become more or less mixed up in the time gone by. That gave us the needed clew, and I reckon we worked it for all it was worth!"

"I followed Talfourd when he set out after his family. I gave you the signal which led you to attack him. If you failed to doctor his pistols, I was to do the job, having gotten into his good graces by coming to his rescue, at the risk of my own life—ha! ha! And it all worked like a charm, despite the interference of that infernal Rivers—"

"Who will never spoil a neat job again!" interposed the Spaniard, with a savage click of his teeth. "The boys stretched his neck, and Pueblo Davo raised his scalp for his mate, Tomaso Garguerez! But who and what was he, anyhow?"

"You tell!" evasively replied Sleek Sam, drooping his eyes the better to conceal the quick glow which filled them.

"Well, it matters little, since he is gone for good!"

"Just so. But to resume: I contrived to render his guns useless, during the scramble which followed, and having gained his good will, the rest was easy enough. I discovered that Diego Zarate was a member of the Order, when he tried to lend me a few inches of his knife, that night. I gave him the grip, and he acknowledged me his master."

"I went over town and stirred up the boys. I sent one with the word to you, and happening on that infernal tramp, tried to put him out of the way, but slipped up on it. I told Dan and

his mate when to call at the house, to set us free, and they played their parts to perfection.

"You know what followed. With just enough outsiders in the party I selected to follow me, to bear witness to the facts, should the necessity arise, I hastened to reach you at the appointed time—day-dawn. Cat-eyes was perfectly trained, and timed his pace just right. Of course it would not do to run on you too soon, nor yet take men there who would shoot to kill when they closed in; so I stole on ahead to give you a chance to take to the timber."

"It was my intention to set Randal Talfourd free, just when he had received injuries which would, or which might be made, to by careful manipulation, prove fatal in the end. I was just on the point of *frightening* you, when that cursed Rivers broke cover and turned his batteries loose."

"I was so utterly taken by surprise, that he got fairly ahead of me, and though I sent two bullets at his head as he carried the woman into the water, I wasted my lead."

"Fortunately for our plans, Rivers came back into the trap, and still more luckily, one of the lads whom he shot down, was capable of swearing away his life. He swore that Rivers was in reality the head center of the whole business, and having turned against his brother members of the League, he was condemned to death."

"I know all about that part," said Despilfarro, with a trace of impatience in his tones. "What I am most interested in now, is the fate of Randal Talfourd and his wife—ten thousand curses on my ill luck! I wanted her for my own!"

"You took a queer method of winning her affections!" the gambler laughed, heartlessly.

"I wanted revenge for the past, not her love, as you call it," muttered the villain. "I thought to break her proud spirit, by forcing her to witness the torture of her husband. I thought I could bend her to my purpose, then!"

"And drove her crazy, instead! Well, the best of us makes a mistake, now and then. But to my story:

"After leaving you to search for the missing girl, I made the best of my way back to New Babylon, where I found Randal Talfourd and his wife had already arrived. By my orders, they were quartered on Diego Zarate, and the doctor who was attending the mine-owner, gave it as his opinion that the fellow would survive his injuries, provided he received good care, and his mind could be set at rest."

"Of course I expressed my huge delight, and vowed that I would nurse him myself, rather than trust so precious a life to the careless mercies of hired valets. But, all the same, I felt confident that the worthy M.D. was 'way off his rut. Randal Talfourd was looked for a journey up the golden stairs just as soon as he had put his earthly affairs in good order. He was always a considerate sort of cuss, and when he found it would be really inconvenient for him to go on living, I felt confident he would slip his wind."

Soft the tone, suave the smile, but nevertheless there was an evil something in both that caused a cold chill to creep along the spinal column of the Spaniard, fierce and ruthless as he had shown himself to be.

"In plainer words, you mean?" he asked, slowly.

"My dear fellow," drawled Sleek Sam, puffing the blue smoke from his lips and lazily watching them ascend through the growing darkness. "My dear fellow, it is a motto of mine to lend fortune a boost when it seems to need one. I never yet suffered false delicacy to spoil a hand for me, when it could be made more perfect by palming a card or dealing one from the bottom."

"My interests—I should say ours—demanded that Randal Talfourd should live just long enough to make his will, and then gracefully pass away from this sinful earth. If he had the good sense to act thus, of his own accord, so much the more credit to him, and so much the less trouble for yours truly. If not—then my old motto must come into play."

Again Raymon Despilfarro could not help that disagreeable shudder, but this time it was born of personal apprehension. If Sleek Sam was so wholly free from scruples, what was to hinder him from adding one more to the death-list, and thus save the necessity for a division of the booty?

"You seem very thoughtful, old man," suddenly cried the gambler, watching him closely. "What is the matter?"

"I was thinking—wondering whether Randal Talfourd was considerate enough to save you all that trouble!"

"Doubtless he would have been, but for an unlucky mistake of mine. I gave him the wrong draught, and it didn't agree with my dear friend!" dryly replied the Devil of the Mines.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SELF COMPLACENT FIEND.

"In other words, you poisoned him?"

"Well—it might possibly bear that construction, if viewed beneath a microscope," slowly

drawled Sleek Sam as he flung the end of his cigar through the open window and rose with a yawn. "As for me, I prefer to look upon it as a mistake—most unfortunate for Randal Talfourd, but coming just in the nick of time for the firm of Despilfarro, Oswald & Co."

While speaking, he struck a match and lit a large lamp which he placed on the table between them. Despilfarro cast an uneasy glance toward the open window, through which the rays of light now streamed. Sleek Sam, whose gently-beaming blue eyes seemed to take in everything that passed within range, noted this glance and interpreted it aright.

"I am lord of all I survey here, my dear fellow. My servants all belong to the Family, and while they would as soon think of sipping liquid glass for a steady diet as to watch or spy where they have no orders from me, they are constantly on guard, and an evil-disposed flea could not pass their lines unquestioned, let alone any more dangerous animal. If by chance they should find a man—we will say—trying to creep within ear-shot of that open window, as we sit here, the citizens of Dixie would have matter for a funeral to-morrow."

"You speak confidently!"

"Because I am sure of my ground. I know my men, and they know me. I pay them big wages, and liberally reward each and every service which they may be enabled to perform, outside of their regular duties, with a generous band. It costs nothing in the long run, and I can do the work which falls to my share without keeping one eye on the lookout for snakes and a hand on a gun."

The Spaniard was silenced, if not convinced, but it was to be noticed that when it came his turn to make any remark or admission which might prove at all damaging, his voice grew very low and guarded.

"For him—Randal Talfourd—I care but little," said Despilfarro, replenishing his glass, his chin sunk upon his bosom as he moodily stared at the amber liquid as the lamp-light shone through it. "Years ago I swore to never give over the hunt until the grave held one or the other of us. Since he is dead, I suppose I should feel satisfied, but if I could have filled your place in this last act, and just as his soul was leaving his body, hissed in his ear that he owed all of his sufferings and his death to me—I would give ten years off my lease of life!"

"That was impossible, as you know," quietly replied Sleek Sam. "You made him feel your hatred intensely enough, one would think, when you had him on the burning cross. After that exhibition of the warmth of your affection for him and his, it could hardly be expected that Talfourd would welcome you as his nurse."

"Let it pass. Only—"

"Still repining? If you had the whole world, cursed if I don't believe you would covet the moon!" savagely growled the gambler, for an instant revealing his real nature.

"I was thinking about Ysabel—if she could only have been saved! But no matter! I suppose it was to be!"

"You should have played your cards more carefully, then. She fairly idolized her husband, and the sight of him all ablaze on that cross was enough to have turned the brain of a woman whose love was much less absorbing."

"Let it pass!" moodily repeated Despilfarro. "Tell me all that happened. If we are to pull together, I must know every step taken in the matter."

"And so you shall. Before you leave this, you shall be prepared to give accurate answers to every question which may be asked you."

Sleek Sam moistened his lips with whisky, then resumed:

"As the nearest and dearest friend of the unfortunate sufferers, I took complete charge of the business, paying all bills, engaging proper nurses, and acting as general overseer."

"As I told you, the doctor gave it as his opinion that Randal Talfourd would eventually recover from his injuries, though he might possibly remain crippled for life. As for the poor lady, he could do little for her. Her mind was shattered, and it was only by allowing her to sit beside her husband and sing baby-songs to him by the hour, that she could be controlled at all."

"I had a certain point to gain, and I played my cards to that end, with all the skill I could muster. I had a certain amount of old prejudice to overcome in his case, for Talfourd was never a man to associate with or make a bosom friend of any man in my particular line of business; but luckily he knew not a soul in New Babylon on whom he could depend, and the valuable services which I had already been so fortunate as to render him in time of need, added to the great energy which I displayed in organizing bands of men to scour the country in search of the missing daughter, soon gained his whole heart."

"I was in earnest, too, so far as the recovery of Miss Lois was concerned. I had a particular use for her, without which the whole machine might go to wreck. Still, I did not neglect any part of the task I had set for myself."

By a little judicious tampering with the medicine left for my very dear friend, I man-

aged to counteract the good wrought by the doctor, and this, added to the torture of witnessing the melancholy state of his wife, day after day, and his consuming anxiety concerning his missing daughter, soon brought the poor devil very low.

"Without exactly broaching the matter myself, I was not much longer in getting him to thinking about the grave and the disposition which should be made of his worldly pelf. One day he begged me to procure the services of a lawyer, that he might make his last will and testament. Of course I diligently ransacked town for that article, and equally of course I failed to make the rifle. Then, when he seemed in despair, I volunteered my humble services. It hurt me terribly to have to lie to the poor fellow, but I managed to make him believe that I had practiced at the bar—not designating the particular variety of bar, by the way—before I came to the wild and woolly West. As I anticipated, he eagerly accepted my services, and that night he dictated his will."

"Feeling assured that his wife would never recover her right senses, even if she should survive him many days, he made Lois his sole heiress, intrusting the care of his wife to her love. If not couched in strictly legal phrase, I took good care that there should be no ambiguity in the document, and no points for future dispute."

"When his property was enumerated and all minor details made clear, Randal Talfourd named the person who was to act as his executor, and guardian to Lois until she married or became of age."

"You, of course?" nodded Despilfarro, with a smile.

"Not at all," was the deliberate reply. "His faith in me did not go quite so far as that. John I. Mason, of Dixie, was the name mentioned. You know the gentleman, I believe?"

Raymon Despilfarro pushed back his chair with a fierce oath, staring at the smiling gambler with eyes glowing redly.

"Jack Mason! Ten thousand devils! All the gold in the Territory would not bribe him to play into our hands."

"He'll never have the chance," laughed Sleek Sam.

"What do you mean?" irritably demanded the Spaniard.

"That Randal Talfourd gave me his name, but you must remember how terribly I was agitated by the precarious situation of my very dear friend, to say nothing of the natural embarrassment of finding myself drawing up such an important document after having abandoned practice for so many years. Of course my heart was willing, but somehow my fingers failed me, and instead of writing John I. Mason, I set down Samuel Oswald. When I discovered the strange error, it was too late for correction. The will was duly signed and witnessed, and Randal Talfourd was a corpse!"

Raymon Despilfarro stared at the calm speaker, with admiration glowing in his eyes and showing in every feature. And it was in the tone of one uttering a sincere compliment that he exclaimed:

"Well, you are the devil men call you, sure enough!"

Sleek Sam bowed with a meek smile.

"It was a neat bit of work, if I do say it, for I expected nothing else than that the fellow would insist on reading the document over, to make sure that I had made no mistakes. If he had, I very much fear me that Randal Talfourd would never have lived to see another day. Fortunately—for him—he was too weary when all was done, to be suspicious."

"The next day he was still weaker, and beginning to think that I had about served my time for once, when night came again, I gave the watchers their directions, bidding them not forget to give the patient his medicine regularly, or to fail in keeping a close watch over the unfortunate insane lady. I retired to my virtuous couch, for the first unbroken night's rest I had taken since the night of the tragedy."

"I slept, of course. So did the watchers—slept so very soundly that they knew not when the angel of death entered the house. I cannot imagine what they could have taken in their food or drink, to send them so far into dream-land. It was so very unfortunate, too, on that night of all others!"

"I was awakened by one of the men, his eyes almost sticking out of his head with fright and remorse as he told me that Talfourd had died some time during the night. He would have lied to me, no doubt, only the body was cold and stiff, and he knew I would not be deceived."

"I really felt for the poor devil, and in my softness of heart, I agreed to say nothing of their delinquency, but let the outer world believe that we had watched the coming of the death-angel, doing all we could to soothe the last moments of our friend and patient."

"Well, not to make a long story of it, the body was prepared for the grave, and his will carefully sealed up. After due discussion with the doctor, it was decided to keep the body until the next day, in hopes of the return of the

missing daughter. And on that night, another sad event occurred."

Sleek Sam paused to moisten his lips and light another cigar. Despilfarro, turning white as his sallow complexion would admit, gazed keenly at the gambler through his half-closed lids, his hands clenching tightly beneath the table.

"It was deemed best to keep the sad tidings from the insane wife as long as possible, and for that reason she was not suffered to make her daily visit to the bedside of her supposed baby, at the usual hour. She became very uneasy, when detained, and finally grew so wild and frantic, that it was deemed best to place her in close confinement for the time being, having the wife of Diego Zarate as a watcher."

"When day dawned again, a terrible surprise awaited us all. Ysabel Talfourd lay across the body of her dead husband, a long, slender dagger driven to the very hilt in her heart."

A low, savage snarl parted the lips of Raymon Despilfarro as he brought his nervously clinched hands above the table.

"If I thought you killed her, curses on your black soul! I'd tear you limb from limb!"

Sleek Sam gazed at him with uplifted brows, utter amazement imprinted upon his massive face.

"I killed her? My dear fellow, how can you entertain such a frightful idea even for an instant?"

"After your serving him out, what more natural?" growled the Spaniard, yet with less savageness than at first. "I tell you, man, I loved that woman—I loved her as a tiger loves its savage mate! For twenty years, my main hope in life has been to possess her, by force if all other means failed. And now—if I ever find out for sure that your hand drove that blade to her heart, I swear to kill you if it costs me my own life the next instant! I swear it by the Cross!"

"And I swear that my hand never touched that lady, save in the way of kindness!" as positively replied Sleek Sam. "On investigation we found the wife of old Zarate, bound in her room, a blanket wound around her head and eyes. She swore that the madwoman assaulted her, by surprise, and left her thus. Then she sought her husband, and finding him dead, killed herself. There could be no other conclusion arrived at."

"It may be so—I hope it is," muttered Despilfarro, his frame quivering with an unpleasant chill as he stole a nervous glance over his shoulder at the open window. "Better dead than living a madwoman! And yet—Bah!" rising from his chair, with a shiver. "I am not fit to talk more now. I will listen to the rest of your story to-morrow. I must be alone for a time. You say I can have a bed here?"

"Of course," was the ready response. "You have a half-interest in this property, and as much right to use it as I or my wife. Whenever you are in the mood, I will show you your room up-stairs."

"Let it be now, then. Your account has made me sick at heart, and I must be by myself to think it all over. Bear with me, old friend. I will be more myself, to-morrow!"

"You will take a bite before you retire, surely?"

"No—nothing; unless I might—" with a glance at the half-emptied bottle of whisky.

"Of course—it is half yours, you know," laughed Sleek Sam, as he picked up the lamp and led the way from the room.

It was a pleasant chamber which he ushered his partner in crime into, and lighting a lamp therein, he said good-night and parted from his guest, a peculiar smile lighting up his face as he heard the key turn in the lock, inside.

"Sleep soundly, my very dear friend!" he muttered below his breath. "To-morrow? Will it ever dawn—for you?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

RAYMON DESPILFARRO'S REWARD.

If Raymon Despilfarro could have caught the devilish smile which played over the face of Sleek Sam, as he muttered these words, his dreams would have been very slow in coming to his bedside that night. The bland mask was dropped, and the utter flendiness of the gambler was revealed without disguise.

With his usual cat-like tread, Sleek Sam descended the flight of stairs, and was turning into the room where he had held that one-sided conversation with Raymon Despilfarro, when his footsteps were arrested by the appearance of the young woman whom he had introduced to the Spaniard as his wife.

"You have got rid of that ugly brute?" she demanded, in a sharp tone, very different from that in which she acknowledged the introduction to the gentleman of whom she now spoke.

"For the present, yes. He has sought his virtuous couch, and at this speaking, no doubt he is getting an under-bolt on old Murphy."

"Oh, you make me tired!" exclaimed the beauty, with an affected yawn, as she averted her head and languidly motioned Sleek Sam away with one white hand. "Throw common sense at me, or else go put your head to soak."

Strange words to issue from the lips of Lois Talfourd, and stranger still to think of her using such a coarse, hard, and vulgar tone.

Something of this seemed to flit across the mind of the gambler, as he stood gazing upon the young woman, critically noting her figure from top to toe, and closely scanning each feature of her face.

"Well, you'll know me when you see me again, won't you?" snapped the woman, evidently in no angelic humor.

"If not, I would have no difficulty in recognizing you by that melodious voice," laughed Sleek Sam, chucking her under her chin. "That is all that spoils the gorgeous peacock, pretty; and you're built something after the same plan."

His change of tone and manner appeared to smooth the ruffled plumage of the woman, and slipping her arm through his, she led Sleek Sam into a room which seemed devoted to her use alone, judging from its contents and fittings.

She took the lamp from his hand, and placed it upon the table. She closed the door, pushed him down into an easy-chair, and placed herself in a comfortable, if not strictly graceful attitude on his lap. A swift flourish of her white hands ruffled his hair in every direction. A deft touch twisted his white tie around beneath his left ear. Then, holding him fast by each ear, she gazed long and shrewdly into his eyes. Only to relax her hold, and spitefully cuff the ears, as she cried:

"Bah! I can't read you at all to-night! Your eyes are deep and full of mud! You are playing a heavy game, else I could see through your hand, when once I had your gospel-sharp rig knocked west-end-and-crooked! What are you up to now?"

Sleek Sam laughed softly as he ran his hands over his hair and set his tie aright. He was thoroughly used to the impulsive manners of this woman whom he had introduced to Raymon Despilfarro as his wife, and though he felt that he could trust her as completely as he could himself, he took a certain delight in baffling even her penetration.

Enough has been said, in reporting his conversation with his fellow conspirator, for the reader to gain a tolerably accurate idea of the way matters stood in that house. Sleek Sam, through cunning, plotting and unscrupulous acting, had come into possession as the husband of the sole heiress, both parents having met with a sad and lamentable death.

It was with this end fairly in view that the the unscrupulous gambler devised, and with the aid of Raymon Despilfarro and his fellow black-faces, carried to the end his subtle plot.

He was successful in getting rid of the parents, and in shaping the will of the doomed mine-owner to suit his own wishes; but there was still one important obstacle to his perfect success, in the unexplained absence of Lois Talfourd.

Sleek Sam was not over-and-above popular with the citizens of Dixie, where the property of Randal Talfourd was situated. Not only had he strong enemies there, but among them was the particular friend of Talfourd's, John Mason, whose name should have entered that will as the guardian of Lois. Oswald knew that if he gave a ghost of a chance, Mason would never rest until he had probed the affair to the very bottom, and it was to guard against this that he at first made up his mind not to return to Dixie until he had married Lois Talfourd.

Foiled in this by her strange vanishment, and at length forced to believe that she must have met her death while wandering at random through the hills, after her escape from the cabin of death, Sleek Sam brushed up his wits and finally shouted "Eureka!"

A flying trip to Pueblo, and a hasty interview with a young woman known among certain circles there as "High-flyer Kate," resulted in his return with the missing Lois Talfourd, now Mrs. Samuel Oswald!

As such he brought the black-eyed beauty back to Dixie, and as such he introduced her to—among many others—John I. Mason himself.

To spare her terribly lacerated feelings, Sleek Sam took it upon himself to explain everything, and as the story of his great services and sacrifices in behalf of the luckless mine-owner had already reached Dixie, he found it a comparatively simple matter to smooth things over. Mason knew that his old friend was married, and had a daughter; beyond that, even he had been kept in the dark by the grave, serious soldier. Here was the daughter, in the possession of all essential documents, both to prove her identity and to attest her sole right to the property of the dead man. There was nothing to doubt, and only one thing to regret, save the fate of the dead:

"If she had only married a white man, instead of that infernal scoundrel!"

As he laughed, Sleek Sam pressed the petulant woman close to his breast, and kissed her red, pouting lips, then said:

"I was thinking, pretty—thinking how much a man's life was really worth in this wooden country!"

"You mean that ugly brute?" with a nod of

her head in the direction of the chamber where Raymon Despilfarro lay.

"Precisely," with a keen, swift glance into her dark eyes before continuing:

"You remember I told you about him, and how he was to be an equal sharer in this little raise."

"But you'll freeze him out? Surely you won't let him squeeze us that heavily?" she asked, showing her teeth.

"He knows too much, little one," was the slow reply. "One word from his lips would put old Mason on the trail, and from what I have told you of him, you can guess what that would end in—a rope for me, and an iron checker-board for you!"

"If his tongue carries such deadly poison as that, why are you such a fool as to let him run loose? Why don't you draw his teeth, once for all?" whispered the woman, her eyes glittering, an ugly look coming into her face.

"It might not be so easy, and then—"

"Bah!" with a short, hard laugh. "What are you trying to give me? Don't I know—didn't I see you doctoring the way to get into his room? Didn't you tell me that if a man named Raymon Despilfarro was to ever come here, I was to give him that particular room to sleep in? Don't I know what that means? Do you take me for a blanked idiot?"

Sleek Sam laughed softly at her indignation, then said:

"You forget the nature of the Order to which he belongs. Remember what I told you about the oath which binds us, one and all. And all of our servants belong to the League, as well as our good friend up-stairs. If I should pay him off in the sort of currency you hint at, and they ever dropped to our little game, it would be good-by John! with both you and I!"

"They need never know. There is your patent annihilator down in the cellar. Once hidden in that lime, and snugly covered over, that black-avised monkey would never tell tales. As for the servants, leave them to me. I'll satisfy them easily enough, and you will never be questioned about your guest. You will never be such an infernal idiot as to give him half of this big stake, when it is so easy to keep it all to ourselves! If your nerve fails you, go to bed and leave it all to me. I will put a spider in his dumpling, so quick 'twill make your head swim!" swiftly, energetically whispered the woman.

"Cursed if I don't believe you would do it, too!"

"Try me, and see!" was the swift reply.

"When the work is too heavy for my hand, I may, not before, little one," he replied, touching her lips, more of sincerity in his voice and eyes than usual.

"Then you'll do it? You'll pay him in cold steel, instead of gold?" she eagerly whispered, gazing keenly into his eyes.

"If I do, and evil comes of it, you will not blame me?"

A short, hard laugh broke from her red lips.

"Did you ever know Kate High-flyer to squeal, no matter how badly her fingers got pinched?"

"Never yet—I never expect to. Still, this is not like putting an ordinary man out of the way. By lifting a hand against him, I am striking at a thousand others, besides breaking the most solemn and terrible vows man can take upon himself. Discovery, or even suspicion, means worse than death."

Impressed by his low, earnest tones, the woman remained silent for a brief space. Then she spoke again:

"You need not run the risk. I will do the job."

"It would come to the same thing in the end," with a soft laugh, as he toyed with her curling black hair. "I only wanted to set the matter fairly before you, so you might know what we have to guard against. From the very first I have determined to get our dear friend out of the way, as the cheapest method of paying him off, and before the sun rises again, you and I will be the sole owners of the Lost Cause and all the rest of the property Randal Talfourd slaved to accumulate before a malign fate laid him by the heels!"

There was some further conversation between the fitly matched couple before the interesting subject was finally settled in all its details, but enough has been reproduced here to make their meaning clear.

With wine and cigars on the table, both of which were freely used by the pretended Lois as well as Sleek Sam, they waited until their intended victim should be soundly locked in slumber before they made the all-important move.

Twice the velvet footed woman stole up the stairs and listened at the chamber door. As often she returned with an unfavorable report. If sleeping, the rest of Raymon Despilfarro was disturbed and unsound.

Then, hearing with them a lamp, the two plotters descended into the cellar, where Sleek Sam revealed one more evidence of his far-seeing cunning. Removing several barrels and boxes from one corner of the cellar, he scraped away some loose dirt from over boards, then

lifted them carefully. A long excavation was laid bare, partially filled with quick-lime.

Leaving this uncovered, and the cellar door open behind them, they crept silently up-stairs and listened intently at the door of the chamber assigned to Raymon Despilfarro.

Faintly, steadily, they could just distinguish the breathing of their destined victim within. Beyond a doubt he was sleeping soundly, worn out by his long and hard ride.

Sleek Sam hesitated for a moment, then grasped his companion by the arm and silently led her down stairs.

"You are not taking water?" he grated, almost savagely.

"Not a bit of it," was the gentle reply. "But, somehow, I don't want you looking on while I do it, Kate."

She stared at him for a moment in amazement, but then as she read the truth in his eyes, her lip curled, half-scornfully, half-tenderly. Still she made no objection, for she knew that it was his love for her that made him speak thus.

Taking a mask-lantern instead of the lamp, Sleek Sam once more passed up the stairs. Pausing beside the chamber door, he used one hand and the toe of his foot to press upon cunningly-arranged springs at the top and bottom of the door-casing, which then silently swung toward him, bringing the locked door with it.

A cold smile flickered across the face of the murderer as he saw how perfectly his mechanism worked, and then he entered the chamber, pausing to make sure that his victim had not been startled from his slumber.

The breathing was quiet and regular as ever, and Sleek Sam gradually drew the slide of his lantern, turning the glow toward the bed, little by little. He saw the Spaniard lying on the broad of his back, with one arm flung over his head, his chest rising and falling regularly. Then one swift stride carried the assassin to his side, and holding the bared steel on high for an instant to give his aim steadiness, he struck!

A hoarse, gasping cry escaped the lips of Raymon Despilfarro as he felt the steel enter his breast, and Sleek Sam, dropping his lantern, grappled with him savagely—but at the same instant he received a crushing blow on the back of his head, while strong arms were flung around him, bearing him back and to the floor.

Furiously, desperately he struggled to free himself from that crushing grasp, even in that great emergency realizing that it would be ruinous to cry aloud. Twisting, writhing like an eel, he strove to free himself, to get at his weapons with his pinioned arms, but in vain. And then—a bright light was flashed into the room, revealing—great heavens!

The man in whose sinewy arms he was held helpless—the others who moved forward to his assistance—the one who held the light—all were masked—the black-faces!

He was captured alive by the Sons of the Fiery Cross!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TRIBUNAL OF DEATH.

It is the dead of the night, and once more a crackling, roaring fire casts its lurid glow over the deep, dark pool in the little river, where the water runs so silently beneath the slender point of land.

Night, but the silver moon and the starry vault are not visible now as then; instead, the heavy masses of clouds roll and toss high above, to the solemn music of growling thunder; but with this exception, the surroundings are startlingly similar to those which marked the mock-trial and satanic torture of ill-fated Randal Talfourd, more than one month before.

As then, a number of men in sable masks are flitting silently to and fro. Some among them are fashioning a heavy cross of two stout timbers. Others are attaching chains the majority of which still bear the signs of fire, as though having been made good use of on some similar occasion.

And so they have, for they are the self-same chains with which Randal Talfourd was bound to the blazing cross.

With his head and shoulders supported against the same step of earth which once served the unfortunate man and wife for the same purpose, is a man, bound hand and foot, a gag between his jaws. Beside him stands a tall, dark figure, dressed in the Mexican costume. His waist encircled by a belt of arms, his head and face concealed by a jatty mask.

The eyes that stare up at the cowed figure are bloodshot and seem fallen back into their sockets; the temples are marked by swollen veins; the cruel gag effectually prevents the lips from assuming anything like a smile; but for all that no person who had once looked upon his face could mistake the prisoner for other than the once powerful and to be dreaded Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines!

With a quick glance, as though noting how far his men had progressed with the cross, the masked chief drew a knife from his girdle and bent over the prisoner. A touch of the keen edge severed the thongs which held the suffocating gag in place, and casting it aside, he replaced his weapon. With arms folded across

his chest, he gazed upon the fallen gambler, his eyes gleaming vividly through the holes in the black mask.

"Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines—Samuel Oswald—Donald McDonald—or whichever one out of a score names and titles, each one of which you have disgraced by crimes deep and black enough to sink you ten thousand miles into perdition!—you may prefer to be called; you have reached the end of your halter at last! It is a pity that you have but one life to yield up as part atonement for your countless sins, but before that one escapes from your body, you will wish you had never been born!"

At the first sound from those masked lips, Sleek Sam had started, staring at the speaker in utter amazement, but now, with an evident effort, something of his old spirit came back to him, and there was bitter scorn in his tones:

"You craven cur! I thought my steel had forever silenced those lips! No matter; when I am gone, you can say that you have looked at a man die—something which will never be breathed above your carcass, even by your best friend!"

"You recognize me, then?" laughed the masked chief.

"Bah! I could make you out by the smell, though you stood a mile up-wind!" laughed the prisoner, with utter contempt.

The masked chief turned away without reply, and a motion of his black-gloved hand brought the silent black-faces nearer, ranging themselves in a circle.

"My children," said the chief, his voice sounding deeper and more resonant as he continued: "We have congregated here to purge our ranks of a false and treacherous member; to wipe out the black stain which his conduct has cast upon the time-honored records of the grandest and most glorious order which the sun ever shone upon!"

"We have heard, and it is well!"

Spontaneously from each and every member of the mysterious band, came the chorus, weirdly impressive.

"There is not one among us this night, who entertains the slightest doubt of the prisoner's guilt, but notwithstanding, by the laws of our order, he is entitled to a fair and impartial trial before receiving your sentence. For that purpose he has been brought here—"

"And for that purpose you have built the cross before arraigning me!" cried Sleek Sam, with a laugh of bitter scorn. "A fair trial—well, I should remark!"

Not the slightest attention was paid to this outburst. Not an eye was turned toward him, or a word spoken in reply.

"My children! Little more than one month ago, we met in this spot, to try a violator of our laws. The majority of you were present on that occasion, and doubtless still bear in mind the few explanatory remarks which I felt it advisable to make, before opening our court in due form. There is no necessity for my repeating those remarks, for you all know your sacred duty, and I feel confident that you will not shrink from performing it, through either fear or favor."

At a sign from his gloved hand, the prisoner was raised to his feet and held thus. On his face was a smile of insulting defiance. In his eyes glowed the fire of a dauntless spirit. Whatever his faults, and they were legion, Sleek Sam did not have a drop of cowardly blood in his veins.

"Samuel Oswald—no longer brother—you stand here on trial for your life. You are charged with being a traitor. With having plotted against your brethren. With having murdered one of the Sons of the Fiery Cross, when he lay helpless before you—"

"Bah!" cried the accused, with a sneering laugh. "You lie in your throat when you pronounce those words! I did not kill you—worse luck! Give me another chance—only the ghost of a chance!—and if I don't send you straight to your patron saint in hades, Raymon Despilarro, I'll—"

A heavy hand was clapped over his lips, and the bitter flood of words choked off.

"You stand charged with having deliberately broken every one of your most sacred vows, Samuel Oswald, and the penalty of this, as you know, is death!"

"How say you—guilty or not guilty?"

"First, who are my judges? Before what tribunal am I arraigned?" demanded Sleek Sam, his voice cool and even.

"The tribunal of death. Your judges are the members in good standing, of our Most Sacred Order, the Sons of the Fiery Cross!" was the grave response.

"I am beyond the jurisdiction of that court. The Sons have no power to try or condemn me, save as an ordinary mob of lynchers. You must leave out the blazing cross business, or render yourselves liable to punishment before the Supreme Tribunal, for I am not, I never was, a member of the order."

"You have acted as such—have sought and obtained the services of the Sons under that pretext, and—"

"And how I came to have that power, no man knows better than you, Raymon Despilarro!"

farro!" boldly cried the accused. "For gold I hired you and your gang—for gold you disgraced the order you pretend to venerate so highly—for money you sold me your secrets, and prostituted your high position! You told me how the Order did its work. You revealed to me its grips and secret passwords. You put it in my power to ruin the entire League, by giving its secrets to the world! All this you did, for pay; but I never joined the gang, never was initiated, as you must admit, when placed on oath, or else sink your soul to the lowest depths of perdition, by perjuring yourself."

Swiftly he spoke, like one who fears to have his startling revelations choked off before the end was gained. But not a hand was lifted to check him, nor did the tall figure of the masked chief make signal or sign, standing grimly silent, until the accused paused for lack of breath.

"You have made your counter-charges, and they are recorded in the brains of your betrayed brethren. You are on trial, not Raymon Despilarro. When we have settled the question of your guilt or innocence, then his turn will come."

His right hand went up, and as if in obedience to it, one of the black-faces stepped into the circle.

"My son, if you have any charge to make against the accused, speak boldly, and fear not!"

"After he has been sworn!" cried Sleek Sam. "Only one who is or has been a member of the Order can make that demand," coldly retorted the masked chief. "You deny having ever been initiated. Retract that statement, and I will administer the oath."

Sleek Sam laughed, hardly, bitterly. "Go on. What difference? You have doomed me beforehand, and an oath would not faze your witnesses."

"I am ready to take the oath, Father." As he spoke, the witness dropped to his knees. A motion from the masked chief drew the Sons of the Fiery Cross close around him, bared blades in each right hand. Then he spoke:

"By the Burning Cross—by the Running Stream—by the Ashes of Death and the Broth of Hell—I swear that my words shall contain naught but truth! If I perjure myself, may the steel of my Brethren find a living sheath in my bosom!"

"We have heard, and it is well!" chanted the black-faces, then falling back to their former position.

The witness arose, and in a clear, calm tone, uttered:

"I charge that the accused committed murder most foul, on the night, more than a month ago, when we assembled in this place. One of our brothers was seriously wounded that night. By promising to shield him from the aliens who were of the party which the accused led here, Samuel Oswald induced Pelucho Vandillo, the wounded brother, to swear that a man who called himself Hector Ajax Rivers was the real leader in that affair. Then, while the rest were engaged in hanging the poor devil whose life was sworn away, the accused drove his knife deep into the heart of poor Pelucho. He swore that the man died of his former injuries, and wrapping up the body, it was buried in the river."

"How do you know this?" demanded the masked chief.

"I was hidden in the brush, with a bullet through my calf which hindered me from getting away with the rest. I saw it all, but feared to speak out then, lest I, too, be murdered. I crept away from the spot, as soon as I could, and at the first opportunity told the story to my brethren."

A wave of the chief's hand bade the witness withdraw.

Sleek Sam looked graver, paler than before. This was a blow which he had never dreamed of, thinking that the sole charge of murder would be comprised in his attempt on the life of Raymon Despilarro.

But another and still more bitter surprise was in store for the Devil of the Mines.

Again the masked chief raised his hand, and another witness advanced. A woman, closely veiled!

Sleek Sam stared at her, his white teeth biting deep into his lip, as he fancied he recognized Lois Talfourd! But then, as she faced him and flung back her veil, a wild cry burst from his lips—more of sorrow than of fear or anger!

"Kate—you—against me?" he faltered.

At a sign from the masked chief a bandage was flung around his mouth and firmly knotted behind his neck.

"Witness, you will reveal what you know concerning the deadly assault made by the accused upon Raymon Despilarro."

Glibly, heartlessly, High-flyer Kate told her story, adhering pretty closely to the truth, but slightly glossing over the part she herself played in the cunning fraud and subsequent attempt at assassination.

Steadily Sleek Sam gazed upon the woman whom he had lifted up out of the mire—whom he had loved as thoroughly as his hard heart

could love. The light which filled his eyes was hard, but it was not threatening. Strange as it may appear, he felt this treachery far more acutely than he did aught else. While she spoke, it really seemed to him that he could welcome the death which he knew surely awaited him.

With a little laugh and a scornful "lip" at the accused, Kate High-flyer left the "stand," and four men bearing a litter between them drew near. The black-faces opened their circle to give them admittance, and they deposited their burden before the accused. The masked chief stepped forward, and with a swift gesture lifted the light scarf which covered the face of the person on the litter.

The eyes of Sleek Sam stared wildly as they fell upon that face—as the man on the litter raised his head feebly and glared at him with eyes ablaze—and well he might!

This witness was Raymon Despilarro!

Who, then, was the masked chief?

His wild gaze sought the covered face of the latter, but in vain he tried to pierce that sable covering—to read the truth through those eye-lets. He could see the glittering orbs, but that was all. They gave him no clew to the mystery.

"My son," spoke the masked chief, addressing him who had once officiated in that same role, and who had also called the black-faces his children, but who seemed to be of lower rank than the one who now conducted the grim ceremonies: "are you strong enough to bear witness against this criminal?"

"Ay!" with a hard, savage laugh. "I could rise in my very grave, though the worms were feeding on me, to help twist the cords that will bind that devil from Tophet to the blazing cross! A million curses wither him, body and limb!"

"As he has sinned, so shall he suffer," coldly returned the masked chief, stooping and touching the froth-tinged lips of the raving wretch with one gloved finger. "It is justice we seek here, not personal revenge. Calm yourself, and deliver your evidence. Any wild outburst will only weaken your charge in the estimation of this tribunal."

"Swear him first!" muttered Sleek Sam, recovering something of his usual nerve, by a desperate effort of will. "Put to him the sacred oath, and let him perjure himself to all eternity! If he lies too wildly, there are those who will have to correct him, when he comes to be tried for selling the secrets of the Sons of the Fiery Cross!"

"You will never see it, cursed dog!" screamed the wounded man, struggling to rise from the litter.

At a signal from the masked chief, the litter-bearers advanced and promptly removed the wounded man to one side.

"My children," said the chief, gravely. "If you have not fully made up your minds as to the guilt or innocence of the accused, we will wait until Raymon Despilarro is able to give his evidence. In my opinion, this delay is not necessary. The witness who last gave evidence told the story of the attempted murder in full, and I believe that Raymon Despilarro has no different charge to bring against the accused."

"We have heard enough, and are ready to deliver our verdict," gravely replied one of the black-faces.

"It is well. We are ready to listen."

"We find the accused guilty, as charged. We find that he brutally and without cause, murdered a sworn brother who lay helpless at his mercy. We find that he has broken all the sacred vows which bind our League together. That he has made illegal use of our arms. That he has wantonly assailed a Father of our Order, only missing his life by a miracle."

"There is naught that can be said in extenuation of his crimes, and we demand, oh, Father! that you pronounce upon him the extreme penalty provided for traitors and assassins!"

Bowing low, the spokesman of the black-faces folded his hands over his chest, and fell back.

The masked chief turned toward the doomed man, speaking gravely, his voice sounding hollow beneath the sable covering:

"Samuel Oswald, you have heard the demand which those on whose tongues your life rested, have made of me. I have no right to go outside of their verdict, and in this case I am bound to say that my judgment fully agrees with theirs. You have lived a life of shameless crime and evil-doing. There is not one bright spot in all your black record. Your hand is deep-dyed with the life-blood of the innocent and the harmless. You have waded through sin and wickedness until your very footprints pollute the soil they touch!"

"As one of the three heads of this Most Sacred Order, I now pronounce upon your head the sentence of death, against which there can be no earthly appeal. The words are not mine, for I read them direct from the unwritten laws of the Order:

"We give your body to the Burning Cross—your ashes to the Running Water, to make broth for the demon who first tempted you to prove false to your sacred vows."

In deep and hollow chorus, the circle of black-faces repeated the dread sentence after their

chief, word by word, to the end. Then, after a brief pause, came the chant:

"We have heard, and it is well!"

With a wave of his hand, the masked chief fell back, his arms folded across his chest as he silently watched the swift and methodic movements of his grim satellites.

Four of their number quickly raised the cross to the identical spot which a similar one had occupied, when Randal Talfourd was the victim of the grim band. Others scattered dry fagots around the base. Two of them knelt beneath the cross, offering their broad shoulders as supports for two others, who liberally anointed the timbers with gum and oil.

Still and motionless in the grasp of his guards, Sleek Sam watched their movements. His eyes were glowing vividly, but that was all. Not a muscle or nerve quivered. His face, where revealed to view, was pale, but calm. Though he must have known that a most frightful death was about to be his doom, sending him all unprepared into the presence of his Maker, with a crushing load of unpardonable sins upon his head, he quailed not. Truly, he was a man of nerve!

Steadily the preparations went on, and at length were ready for the prisoner. His guard carried him to the foot of the cross, gripping him tightly when the chains were linked to his wrists and his other bonds cut, evidently anticipating a desperate effort on the part of the doomed man to break away and either escape or else force his enemies to slay him outright; but nothing of the sort occurred.

It seemed as though Sleek Sam had given over all hopes of escape, and had steeled his nerves to endure his fate with the fortitude of a man of pure grit.

He was dragged clear of the ground, and the chains made fast, stretching his arms out at right angles. Then the black-faces descended from the cross, looking toward the masked chief, on whom the actual execution devolved.

He stepped to the crackling fire, and picked up a blazing brand by the unignited end, swinging it around his head as though to increase the volume of flame.

As he did this, he stood almost directly beneath the man bound to the cross, and with a dexterous motion, he tore off his sable mask, Sleek Sam staring wildly at him just then.

A wild cry escaped his lips, for the doomed man recognized him now! Had the grave given up its dead? If not, how came Hector Ajax Rivers there, alive, unharmed?

And then, with loud cheers, a crowd of armed men leaped out from cover and pounced upon the astounded black faces!

"Take them alive!" cried the tramp-detective, sharply.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CLOSING SCENES.

FROM the litter on which he had been carried in to give his evidence, Raymon Despilarro watched the black-faces bind the man whom he so bitterly hated to the cross.

Though partners in crime, and agreed sharers in the cold-blooded scheme which ended in the death of Randal Talfourd and his wife, there had never been any love lost between the two villains. Neither ever fully trusted the other, and though he himself had thoroughly racked his brains for some cunning trick by means of which he might "freeze out" Sleek Sam and turn all the profits to his own use, Raymon Despilarro felt himself the most shamefully abused man in the wide world, when the biting steel that sunk so deep into his breast that night told him that Sleek Sam had exercised his wits in the same direction, but with a much better prospect of success.

His sole regret was that he lacked the physical strength to take a more prominent part in the execution. With blazing eyes and grinding teeth; with a bloody froth tinging his livid lips, he lay gloating over the scene, growling and snarling to himself, more like a crippled devil than aught human.

But then, when the tramp detective tore off his mask and cried aloud to the armed men, who leaped from cover and pounced upon the astounded black faces, a screeching curse of horrible rage and disappointment burst from the lips of the wounded wretch, and given strength by his very fury, he partially rose on his litter, leveled a revolver at the sinner on the cross, sending bullet after bullet at him, as fast as his nimble fingers could work the trigger.

Swift as thought Rivers leaped toward him, but too late to foil the infuriated wretch. The weapon was emptied, and with a wild, maniacal yell of laughter, his head fell back, his body writhing and twisting like one seized with a fit.

Whatever its nature, the attack proved fatal to Raymon Despilarro. Even as the hands of the detective touched him, his form straightened out with a convulsive spasm, then as suddenly grew limp and nerveless. Rivers believed he had swooned away from weakness and loss of blood, but it proved to be the touch of death. When there was time for examining him, the Spaniard was found dead.

But even in death he had made sure of his revenge. His first shot had pierced Sleek Sam to the brain, and the one time Devil of the Mines never felt the succeeding shots.

Dixie, lighted up by the soft glow of the setting sun.

Again there is the figure of a man pacing to and fro along the veranda before the house which Randal Talfourd built before going to meet his loved ones. This man, also, is talking to himself, and he, too, finally comes to a halt, and shading his eyes with his hand, gazes keenly across the little town to the little cloud of dust which rises there, thrown upon the wind by the hoofs of trotting horses.

"It's them!" with enthusiasm too intense for him to pick and choose his words. "Whooray for we-us-and-company!"

Half an hour later a very select group met in the same room where Sleek Sam told his story of merciless crime to Raymon Despilarro. Among them were our old friends, Hector Ajax Rivers, Willard Yorke, and Lois Talfourd.

It would take much time and space to record in full all the words spoken during that consultation. Enough for our purpose can be summed up in a very few lines.

It will be remembered that Willard Yorke, after leaving Lois Talfourd with his horse, came upon Pueblo Dave, bending with bared blade over the prostrate figure of Hector Ajax.

Believing that he meant murder, Yorke covered the ruffian and fired, then darting forward and grappling with the wretch. But Pueblo Dave made no resistance, and considering him slain outright, Willard turned to Rivers, alive, though bound and gagged. A minute later he was set free, and before long was telling his curious story.

Pueblo Dave, true to his partner, Tomaso Garguez, who had sworn by all the saints to terribly avenge the death of his younger brother, with his own hand, volunteered to act as hangman, with the firm resolve to save the life of the seeming tramp, if it lay in his power. Not through any sentiments of pity or of mercy; but simply because he felt that his life was justly forfeited to Garguez, whose hand alone had any right to cut it short.

While acting his rude burlesque, Dave managed to make the doomed man comprehend his intentions, and thus aid in his own escape. He jammed the knot so that it would not slip, and aided in this by the shaggy beard of the tramp, he placed the rope so it caught over the strong chin, instead of pressing with full force upon the throat. Thus, when dragged slowly into the air, by not struggling, and keeping his muscles stiff, Rivers was capable of hanging for some time without positive injury to himself.

Fortunately the death-cry of the murdered black-face drew all of the hangmen away, and Dave quickly untied the rope and lowered the detective to the ground, knowing that if the fact was discovered by any of the band, it would be believed the hastily tied knot had loosened of its own accord.

Luckily, however, nothing of this kind happened, and the men rode away with Sleek Sam, leaving Dave behind to dispose of his game. It was while he was threatening Rivers with scalping, that Yorke came upon them, as detailed.

Pueblo Dave was badly wounded, but not slain outright, and by threatening him with the rope, he was forced to reveal all he knew concerning the diabolical plot of Sleek Sam. From him Rivers also learned much that afterward came into good play when he assumed the character of a black-face.

From him it was learned that any open attempt to interfere with Sleek Sam and his present charges, the Talfourds, would surely result in their own destruction. Half of New Babylon was in his pay, and the other half would sooner side with sin than lose their lives in behalf of honesty.

Besides, Dave believed—or swore to that effect—that Sleek Sam meant no actual injury to his victims, beyond what they had already suffered. He intended gaining their good will, in hopes of wedding Lois, and thus eventually coming in for a share of the mining property.

An additional reason for acting under cover was found when Willard Yorke returned to the spot where he had left Lois Talfourd. She was muttering incoherently, in the first stages of a violent fever.

A hasty consultation resulted in the entire party—the sick maiden being carried in the arms of her lover, while the wounded black-face rode on a horse which was discovered near, belonging to himself—striking out for the nearest station on the railway. Here Rivers, by a display of his badge and documents which proved him a government detective, swore the station agent to strict secrecy, and they took the first train coming along, which happened to be one going away from New Babylon. Thus it was that the search for Lois Talfourd was foiled.

Believing that the Talfourds were safe enough, for the present, while Lois was missing, Rivers perfected his plans before disguising himself and visiting New Babylon. He reached town, just in time to hear of the suicide of Isabel Talfourd, through grief for her husband.

He, as Raymon Despilarro did later, believed that Sleek Sam murdered the poor crazed woman, and from that day on, not a move of the Devil of the Mines escaped his espial.

He followed Sleek Sam to Dixie and biding his time, certainly laid his snares which were to bring the arch criminal to justice. Thanks to the confession of Pueblo Dave, Rivers was enabled to put the secret machinery of the black-faces into motion, and though he little suspected the fact, every one of the servants, of whose fidelity he boasted to Kate, was ranged against him, ready to obey the least sign of the one who convinced them he represented the highest degree in their secret society.

The reader has seen how the plot worked.

When "Hector Ajax Rivers" had finished his explanations, Kate High-flyer was brought into the room, and being placed on oath by the justice of the peace, then present, she made full and unreserved confession. She told how she had assumed the role of heiress, but admitted that her part was all a lie.

Then, with a stern admonition to leave Dixie as far behind her as possible, without a moment's unnecessary delay, she was conducted out of the room and house.

She was only too glad to steal away beneath the shades of twilight, for already the citizens of Dixie were gathering with muttered threats, and she feared her sex would not wholly protect her from harm, when their passions ran highest.

It may appear very careless in the detective, especially as he loudly affirmed that he held proof sufficient to hang every mother's son of the black-faces, to have left his prisoners under a merely nominal guard, while he went to the house on the knoll to see his young friends righted; but certain it is that there was no resistance to the mob when they demanded possession of the sinners. And Hector Ajax only shrugged his shoulders when told that the black-faces were set free, after being soundly flogged and ducked, with a stern warning to never disgrace Dixie with their presence, under penalty of death.

Some even whispered that the mob was acting under his orders; that he had no positive proof against any of them as all of their evil deeds had been committed while masked. Be this as it may, he certainly made very little effort to recapture any of them.

Only a select few ever knew why he had assumed the garb and name of Hector Ajax Rivers. With the death of Donald McDonald—alias Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines—his mission was foiled, and when Willard Yorke, who, as the soon-to-be husband of Lois Talfourd, offered him high wages to take charge of the Lost Cause and other property in Dixie, while he was absent on business, the detective gladly accepted.

Willard hurried away to his ranch, and was not long in disposing of it, to advantage. He hurried back, and then—

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THE END.

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